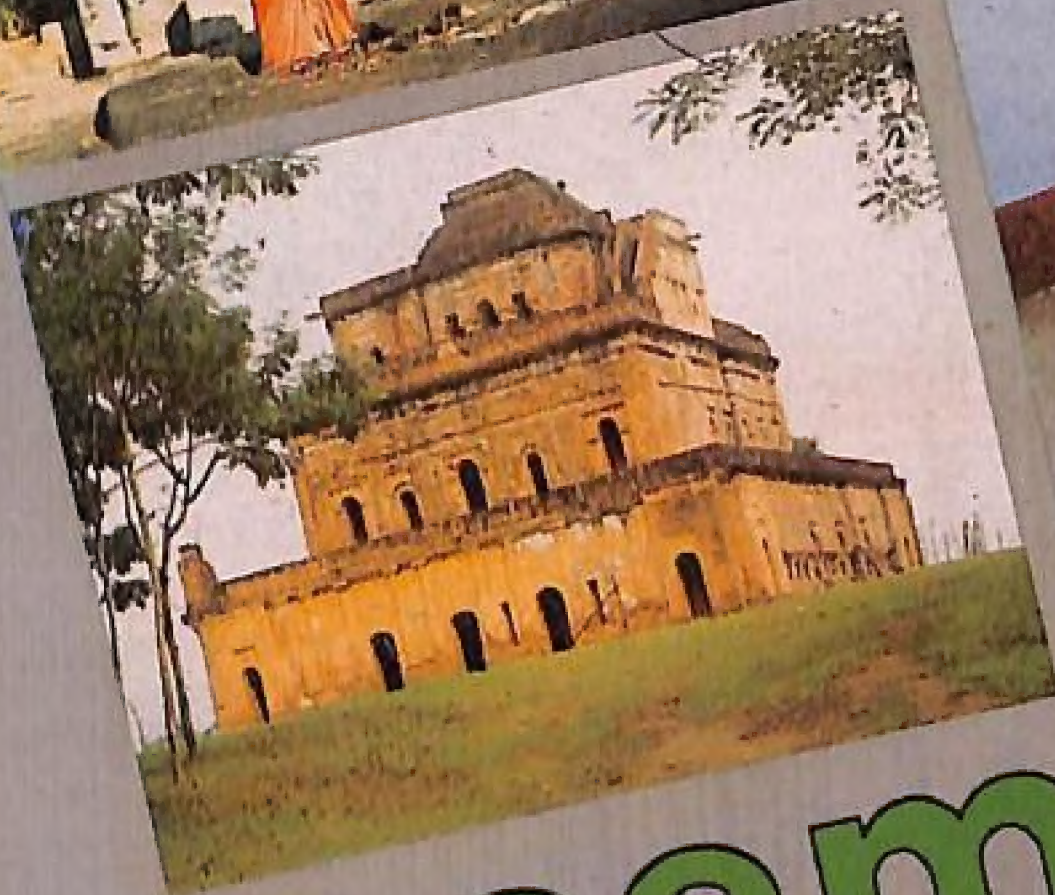


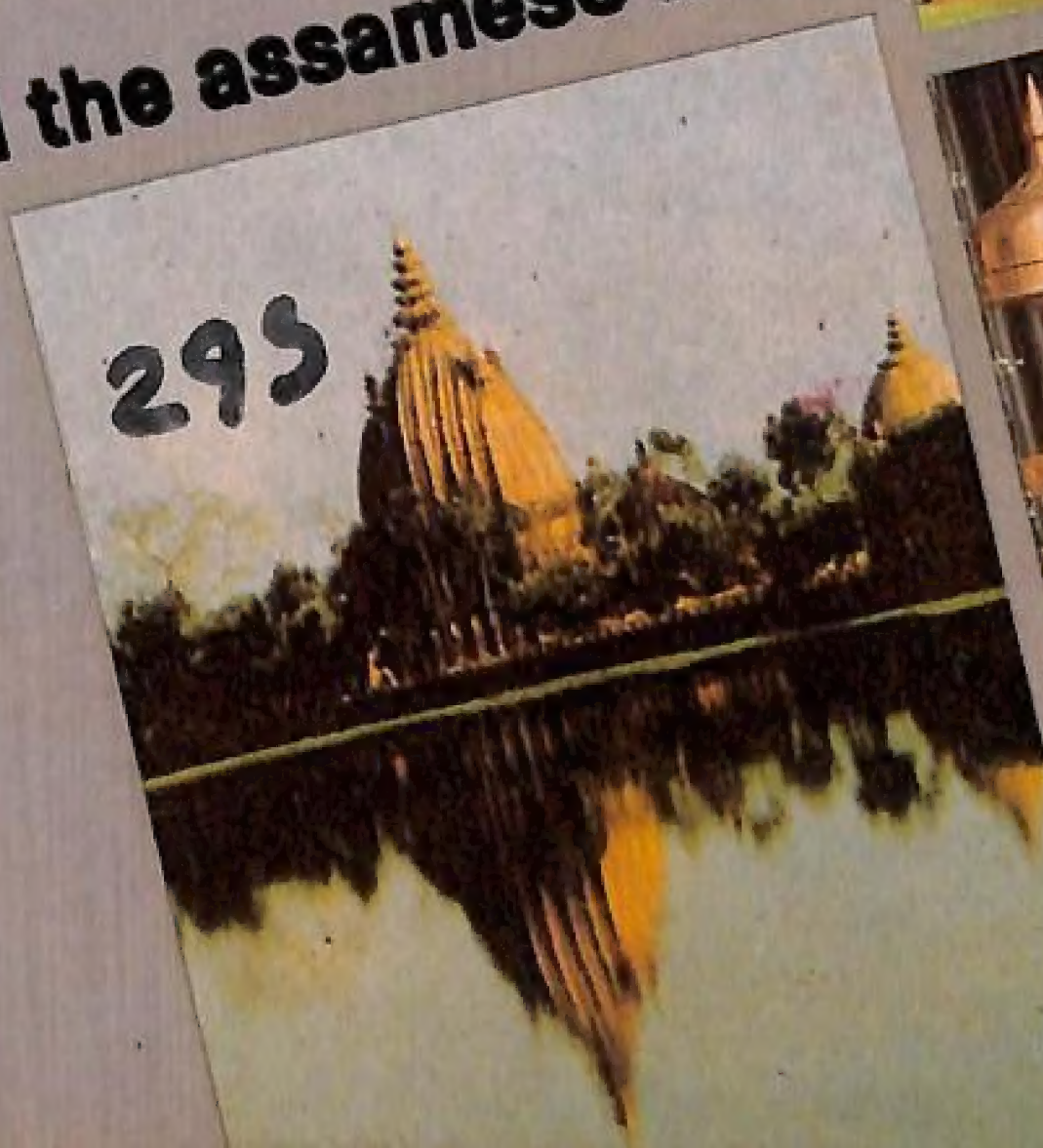


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Edited by

NAGEN SAIKIA

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Chandrakanta Handiqui Bhavan
Jorhat-785001 : Assam

ASSAM AND THE ASSAMESE MIND

Edited by
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Published by
Nahendra Padun

General Secretary
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Publisher's Note

Assam and the Assamese Mind was published ten years back in 1980 when the Assam agitation was on its peak. The main objective of publishing this book was to make people know about the problems that were faced by the state and the hopes and aspirations of the people of Assam and the causes of their anguish and agony. (Dr) Nagen Saikia, the then General Secretary of the Asam Sahitya Sabha was the editor of the book. The book, as soon as it came out from the press received appreciation and admiration from many corners and a second print was to be made quickly.

For the last ten years the book was out of print, but demand for the book is found to be still there. Therefore, the Executive Committee of the Asam Sahitya Sabha, under the Presidentship of Sri Nava Kanta Barua, decided to bring out a revised edition of the book, and requested Dr. Saikia to do the needful in this regard. I am happy to record that inspite of his busy schedule he agreed to extend his service, and has done the work timely. The readers will find one article more in this edition under the title "Brahmaputra Valley Civilisation" written by a renowned historian Dr. P. C. Choudhury, and the replacement of the article "Assam deserves better understanding" by Dr Nagen Saikia with another article written by him under the title "The social changes in Assam through the Ages."

I, on behalf of Asam Sahitya Sabha express our indebtedness to the writers, without whose contribution the plan of the book would not have been a reality.

I would like to thank Nabajiban Press of Calcutta for enabling us to bring out the book timely and nicely. I hope, the book will be received by the readers warmly.

1 November 1991
Bhagavatiprasad Barua Bhavan
Guwahati-1

Nahendra Padun
General Secretary
Asam Sahitya Sabha



ASSAM AND THE ASSAMESE MIND

Its not like our land. Its sky is not like our sky. Its sky sends rain down without the originating cause of clouds. On its ground the green grass sprouts up without any aid from the soil. It stands outside the circle of the earth and the bowels of the enveloping sphere. It has been separated from the world like the letter *aliph*...."

That was how Assam appeared to Mulla Dervish of Herat who accompanied Mir Zumla in his incursion to the then independent kingdom at the head of a Moghul army. Assam was for the invading army a land beyond their known limits of the earth—a weird land where everything defied all earthly concepts and comprehensions.

She has in fact always been for the rest of the world a land far beyond the expanse of common knowledge. She is a land not accessible, not by surface or water routes alone, but even through flights of imagination. Myths and mysteries have always shrouded her. In the yester years, one meticulously avoided erring into this eerie land for fear of being waylaid by witches, and of being turned into a lamb. Assam, the average Assamese bemoans, is perhaps the most misunderstood land under the sun. The invading forces in the middle ages took her to be an uncouth tract simply because life and living pursued there did not answer to their values of civilised life. The Britishers misprised Assam's values of valour and her aversion to alien overlordship as manifestations of innate rusticity and unrefined mind. Even no less a person than Mahatma Gandhi, before he "fell in love" with the Assamese woman who 'weaves fairy tales on her loom' and who 'displays signs of a very high culture' was swayed momentarily by rumours about Assam. The average Indian from Kashmir to Kumarika still harbours all sorts of uncanny impressions about the State. She is for him a sequestered land of myths, magic

and mesmerism, a remote land of reptiles, rhinos and rains. The media men beeline to the State to measure the fury of the red river, to gauge the intensity of the earth tremors or to carry back whatever inspires the sensational headlines. Tourists do come here to drink in the divine blue that tints her sky or the immense green that colours her valleys. Some come to meet the unihorned rhino in its picturesque habitat, some others just to have the thrills of a sojourn to another world. All of them go back without seeing the real Assam. They go back without confronting the Assamese mind. They go back before Assam's long human history and her heritage are unfurled to them. The long history behind the evolution of the colourful human landscape, the values and virtues cherished by the people all through do not get their attention and are missed. They go back without knowing what hopes and fears, what agonies and anguishes simmer beneath the immense green stillness.

Assam is often called a land of colours—a land of colourful nature and of colourful people. A highway for international migration of men, materials and ideas since the beginning of human history, Assam has always been a meeting ground of races and cultures. She has over the ages enticed human swarms from diverse hives. The cultural mosaic that was gradually evolved through fraternisation of the bewitched visitors often inspires us to liken Assam to India herself—as varied and as vibrant. The history of Assam is essentially the fascinating story of a continuing process of assimilation of races and cultures on the fertile banks of the red river. The red river itself symbolically and gracefully meanders through the green valley fed on way with generous tributes from the surrounding hills and dales and finally empties itself into the fathomless expanse of the sea.

Assam is a colourful land. But the tangles of history and geography, the frequent cycles of natural afflictions and legions of perennial odds have robbed the people as much of the colours of their lives. They groan in the backyard of progress and different sections live in different stages of development. Time has not moved for some of them since the earliest conceivable ages.

With bountiful natural resources—virgin woods, unexplored ores, untapped hydro potentialities—and enviable human wealth, Assam can nonetheless reasonably look forward to a happy and prosperous future. The contours of a promising life have already stirred the masses but their journey into modernity still remains treacherous. It involves their breaking free from the accumulated backlog of ages and their outpacing formidable odds before catching up with the rest of the nation. They have no doubt still retained their zest for life but giving better content to it depends largely on the helping hand of the nation.

Assam needs the nation's support and patronage, the nation's love, understanding and affection. Her agonies and anguishes have to be understood, her hopes and fears comprehended, her values and virtues appreciated. Her sentiments have to be reciprocated. Assam is the country's sentinel in the sensitive east and she has given a good account of herself at times of threats from beyond the borders and flare-ups within. Assam had made common cause with the main land even in the epic days. Back to the backyard of our own times, Assam too embraced the bullets and shed precious blood for the country's liberty. Assam too is India and she is always proud to be. She has never grudged the assimilation into her society even recent waves from the farthest frontiers of the country. The values and virtues that enliven and keep alive these rare traits should not be hazed in any haste to explain away the outward manifestations of the agonies and anguishes of a people. That will lead to one error after another and the lovely but lovelorn land will be wronged again.

It has been attempted in the following pages through writings of several eminent writers of Assam to provide to the readers a sketchy idea of the history and heritage, the values and virtues and the hopes and fears of this eastern sentinel of the country. We do not claim to have captured much within this limited space, nor is it our objective. Our objective rather is to stimulate in the minds of the readers a meaningful interest in Assam and her people, a sympathetic understanding of her wails and woes, a correct appraisal of her values and virtues, without which real Assam will always elude even the

most observant viewer of the Assam scene. Our objective is to provide to the reader an insight into the Assamese mind. It is to bring Assam nearer to the heart of the nation. It is to tell the nation in a whisper how the lovely one wants to love and be loved.

We are very much grateful to our respected writers for their valuable contributions without which this little book would have never come to light.

Thanks go to Sri Jogesh Sharma for his help and to Saraighat Offset Press, Gauhati for making it possible to bring out the book within a short period of time.

May 10, 1980

Nagen Saikia

PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

ASSAM AND THE ASSAMESE MIND was out of stock for last several years. Having noticed the demand for the book, the Executive Committee of the Asam Sahitya Sabha decided to bring out a second edition of it. Though many of the writings are topical in nature, yet they contain the reactions of the Assamese mind in a certain extraordinary situation into which the whole State was gulped.

In this second edition, one article on the "Brahmaputra Valley Civilization" by Dr. P.C. Chowdhury, an eminent historian of Assam, has been added. Moreover, my own article "Assam deserves greater understanding" has been replaced by another article of mine under the title "The Social History of Assam through the Ages". I am thankful to Dr. Ashok Bhagavati, lecturer in English of the Desha Bandhu College of Delhi for doing the English translation of my original article in Assamese.

The manuscript of the book was made ready about a year and a half back. I would like to put on record that Prof. Nava kanta Barua, a noted poet who was then president of the Sabha and Shri Satish Chandra Choudhury, the General Secretary of the Sabha took interest in getting the book ready. But somehow or other it could not be brought out at that time. I am thankful to Shri Nahendra Padun, present General Secretary, for his keen interest in getting the book published before this current year ends.

Nabajiban Press of Calcutta also deserves thanks for making it possible for us to bring out the book nicely and in time.

I once again owe a debt of gratitude to our respected writers for their valuable contributions without which this little book would have never come to light.

2 October, 1991
177 South Avenue,
New Delhi-110011

Negen Saikia

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ASSAM'S CONTRIBUTION TO INDIAN CULTURE

Dr. Praphulladatta Goswami

Geographically, Assam hardly seems a part of India. Its hills and rivers, jungles and swamps, heavy-rainfall and soft climate are alien to the dry and dusty plains of the other parts of the country. As one leaves North Bihar and gets into Assam by train, at once a feeling comes as if one is in a land which is not India. Assam's fauna and flora too have affinities with the Malayan region rather than with India. If at one time the legendary magic of Kamarupa-Kamakhyā turned visitors into sheep, much of the magic have been the charms of this green and fertile land and the influence of its soft and humid climate.

Politically, till the advent of the East India Company in 1824, Assam was rather away from the mainstream of Indian politics. Pragjyotisha, Kamrupa and later Assam, had led a more or less independent and self-contained existence since early times. Though it had to resist invaders from the west sometimes, it had been content to build up one or more flourishing kingdoms centred chiefly on the Brahmaputra valley but also including a part of northern sub-Himalayan tract. There are people even now who feel that it might have been better for Assam not to have joined India in 1947.

Now, this is only one aspect of the situation since Assam's culture and civilisation are primarily Indian. In fact, Assam may be described as the outpost of Indian civilisation in the North-east. Modern Bengali prominence in lower Bengal and Bengali publicity make people forget that Assam is contiguous to Bihar if we ignore the few miles of intervening north Bengal.

Traditionally, Assam's western boundary was the Karatoya (*karatoyam samasritya*) and people from Bihar and other parts of northern India found it convenient to spread out easily towards the east along the sub-Himalayan tract. Chinese records tell us that as early as the second century B.C. there was through Assam a route of Indian migrations to parts of Yunnan. The early migrations and settlements have left plenty of sculptural ruins all along the northern belt of the Brahmaputra valley right up to the heights of Arunachal. Assam's main language is Sanskrit-based and this influenced directly or indirectly even the tribal groups who are found scattered all over the valley.

TRIBAL LANGUAGES

The tribal languages have borrowed words and conceptions from Assamese. At one time Khasis spoke of God Viswakarma and Jaintias offered sacrifice to Kali and Durga; Garos recount tales which can be traced back to the Jatakas; Nagas give their own version of the *Panchatantra* tale 'Mouse maid Made Mouse Again'; Bodos explain the meaning of the five rides of their sacred siju cactus in terms of the Indian five elements of creation (*Panchabhutta*).

People came, settled, mixed with the local tribal elements, and merged into a community known as Assamese. The Sanskritic language, Assamese, was instrumental in bringing the various groups closer. As early as the seventh century A.D. the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang noted that the language of Kamrupa "differed a little from that of mid-India". Assamese held away from the eastern end of the land to the present-day north Bengal, till part of western Assam (Cooch-Bihar) was absorbed in the Moghul empire in the 17th century and later in modern Bengal.

Side by side with this language, Sanskrit, the great vehicle of Indian culture, was cultivated as evidenced by rock and copper plate inscriptions dating from the 5th century. The social system of the Assamese reveals the formative influence of the Indian *varnashrama* system along with the common

samskaras. The cultivation of arts—sculpture, music, dance etc.—shows pan-Indian affinities. The political ideals of the Assam kings—use of terms like *Paramabhattaraka*, *Muharajadhiraja* and the performance of the *Aswamedha* sacrifice—were common Indian ideals. Even the land system derived from the old Indian land system.

When did the Aryan Indian influence start flowing into Assam? If Videgha Mathava colonised Bihar in the 7th century B.C. (*Satapatha Brahmana*), the thrust towards Assam must have commenced within a century or two. We have, however, no record of the earliest immigrations into this land. Recorded history begins with the Varman dynasty to which belonged king Bhaskar Varman, the ally and friend of King Harshavardhana.

On the other hand, *Kalika Purana*, a Tantric work of about 10th century, preserves certain traditions which tell us that a prince of Mithila in north Bihar, Narakasura, son of God Vishnu and foster child of king Janaka led an army into Assam and defeating its Kirata inhabitants founded a kingdom here. These Kiratas had shaven heads and yellow skin and were addicted to flesh and drink. Their religion was a kind of Shaivism, but in opposition to it Narakasura started patronising the Sakti goddess Kamakhya whom he also attempted to marry. Narakasura also settled twice-born Aryans in his kingdom. He seems to have been a civilising influence till he grew pleasure loving and evil and ultimately lost his life when another invading thrust came from the west.

As the zone of Aryan civilisation expanded eastward and southward, the various geographical areas of the sub-continent came to be incorporated in the common store of Indian knowledge. Though Assam was outside Aryavarta at the beginning, it came to find prominent mention in works like the *Mahabharata* and the *Vishnupurana*. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is not ignorant of the aromatic products of Assam. Tantric geographical lists took special pains to emphasise the importance of Kamarupa as the place of worship of Goddess Kamakhya.

Thus, as it seems, India not only civilised Assam, it also remembered this part of the country with respect and apprecia-

tion. Even though politically Assam led a distinctive life, it could not ignore what may be characterised as Indianism. Where lies then the special features that may be construed as Assam's contribution to the common store of Indian civilisation and culture?

EXTENSION OF INDIAN CULTURE

The first and foremost contribution of Assam seems to be this extension of India's cultural influence in this part of the country. Assam's population is heterogeneous. Swarms of people from the west, the north, and the east have come here from time to time and settled. This process must not have been peaceful all the time, but till the advent of Christianity (nothing against it as a religion as such) backed by alien imperialism and the post-independence romanticism of Sri Nehru, which muddled the political situation, the tendency had been towards fusion in race and culture, a tendency towards absorption of all sections of the people into the pattern of Indianism.

I have spoken of the moulding influence of the *Varnashrama* system earlier, but the caste system was never rigid in this land. The Brahmin did not drive the plough but he never despised physical work, thus going against Indian caste principles. Either because of the tribal dominance in the population or because of the liberalism of the local administration here social relationship was easy and comparatively enlightened with the result that conversion to Hinduism was going on all the time.

Kamalakanta Bhattacharya (1853-1936) who castigated the people of Assam for their divisiveness in respect of caste and sect and hammered the importance of a unified society, pointed out clearly that child marriage, dowry, indifference to physical labour, etc. were not typical of this land but were pernicious influence imported by Bengali Brahmins in fairly recent times. He was honest enough to admit that while Bengal was trying to get away from the restraining influence of earlier orthodoxy, the Assamese educated went on as before in

a complacent manner Bhattacharya went so far as to declare that when Indian Brahmins gave original contributions in science and philosophy, they were beef eaters. Now it is interesting to note that a medieval work, *Yogini-Tantra*, says clearly that one is required to eat in this land the flesh of the duck, the pigeon, the tortoise and the pig, and if one does not, one has to suffer calamities. Even Vaishnavas take fish and meat (not pork, of course) in this land. It was this liberalism which drew the tribals into the Hindu fold.

Assam is known to be a centre of Tantricism with the well-known centre at Kamakhya near Gauhati; a few of the leading North-Indian Tantric gurus are from Assam, for instance, Saraha and Minanatha. Assam, however, does not take pride in its Tantric past and but for lax food habits, the people do not seem to have been keen on Tantric worship. In fact, even Vishnu worship was not unknown here in the early centuries of the Christian era. A great flood of Vaishnavism (neo Vaishnavism) entered the land at the turn of the 15th century and Vaishnavism is the dominant faith of the Assamese people at present.

ANOTHER WAVE

With Vaishnavism came another strong wave of Indianism, but modified by local conditions. Sankardeva (1449-1568) and his associates adapted Vaishnava scriptures and wrote prose versions of the *Gita* and the *Bhagavata* in Assamese, introduced drama in the local language, taught the people how to dance and sing, and how to live cleanly, in body and mind.

Sankardeva has great things to teach. The *Satra* or Vaishnava establishment initiated by him were democratically run great cultural centres. Sankardeva was not a *sannyasi*, being a person with a wife and family. What he stressed seems to be the ideal of the virtuous householder—not one who bypasses one's normal activities. Secondly, his creed can be summed up in one line: *eka deva eka seva eka bine nahi kewa*. (One God, one faith, none else than that One). He was too well versed in human psychology to allow a consort like

Radha to his God and this lesson might have done a lot of good to other Vaishnava preachers in northern and western India.

There is another thing to the credit of Assam's Vaishnavism. Sankardeva said, *Bhakatita nahi jati, ajati bichara* (There is no discrimination between caste and creed in the field of devotion). It was not possible to do away with the octopus of the caste system, but its rigidity was considerably relaxed. The very fact that a Sudra guru led the people, including Brahmins, had its social impact. Further, low caste people were allowed into the *namghar* or chapel alongwith members of the other caste. Women too could use the common chapel for prayers, but not along with menfolk. One of the important Vaishnava devotees was Narottam, a Naga from the Wancho area in Arunachal.

EDUCATIVE ROLE

Thus, the educative role of Assam Vaishnavism, the insistence on only one God, and caste liberalism are examples which other parts of India might emulate with profit. Body cleanliness of the Assamese is also a result of the teaching of Vaishnavism.

In medieval times Assam had two powerful kingdoms ruling to the west and the east. The western kingdom centering on Cooch-Bihar patronised the Vaishnava preachers and their cultural activities. The eastern kingdom, initiated by a band of Ahom or Shan invaders from the east, gradually expanding till it swallowed up a part of the western kingdom, ruled Assam for six centuries and for the first time in Assam's history brought together the various racial groups under a common hegemony. The Ahoms became Hindu and later came to patronise either the Vaishnava or the Sakta faith. (Their patronage of the Sakta faith, an import from Bengal, later created political conflict and ultimately ruined the land).

The Ahom's great contribution is their political accumen which kept the land independent in spite of onslaughts from the Pathan and Moghul rulers of India. Their sense of realism found expression in their *Buranji* chronicles written both in Ahom and Assamese. The *Buranjis* are the only dependable

histories in the India languages of medieval times. They record events dispassionately and also enshrine considerable political wisdom. The language is unornamented, matter of fact, but occasionally vibrant with sentiment, as when one of the kings gave an assurance like this :

And if I raise a rampart of wood, it will rot ;
If I raise a rampart of earth, it will crumble ;
I have raised the rampart of my word, it will be
ever-lasting.

If we ignore the kings, outstanding ministers like Atan Buragohain and generals like Lachit Barphukan, outstanding women like Mulagabharu, who came out to give battle to a Muslim invader from Gaur when her husband fell fighting, and Princess Jaymati who allowed herself to be tortured to death silently rather than give news of her absconding husband are some of the inspiring personalities we come across in these *Buranjis*. When in the 17th century the Moghul General Mirjumla invaded Assam, he turned back after imposing a humiliating treaty on King Jayadhwaja Singha. The next king Chakraddhwaja Singha found it difficult to swallow the humiliation and prepared for war. At this juncture Atan Buragohain restrained the ardour of the king and counselled. "If one is a king, one should destroy one's enemy and protect the boundaries of one's kingdom. Only then does a king thrive and earn reputation. Your Majesty has spoken well. Yes, we would as it were fall upon the enemy this very day. But we have no stores of food, not much equipment, how can we give battle to the enemy : We will have to provide equipment. If equipment gets destroyed we will have to send repeated supplies. Therefore we must have plenty of equipment. . . . More than all this, food is of the greatest importance, nothing can be achieved if there is a shortage of food"

SARAIGHAT

When General Lachit Barphukan, backed by such a level-headed prime minister, threw out the Mughal occupation

forces at Gauhati (1667), the king said in a tone of relief, "Now it is that I can take a morsel of rice in comfort." But Emperor Aurangzeb did not take the challenge lying down. He despatched Raja Ramsingha of Amber to avenge the defeat and teach Assam a lesson. The diplomatic exchanges and incidents relating to the naval battle of Saraighat (1671) in which Ramsingh had a crushing defeat are described in detail. General Lachit Barphukan was running a high temperature at the time and the news seemed to shake the confidence of certain sectors of the army. This was the message that the general released "Tell them that I have bought a piece of land on the Chila hill (for my death. If I move out, I will do so after all my people." A subordinate commander cried out to his wavering sildiers. "O people, If you want to pour poison on this platter of gold, then leave!"

Assam's Buranjis, which went on being written till the advent of the British contain a lot of material which might be profitable to India even now. They will certainly furnish themes for the novelist and the playwright. Ramsingh's mother and wife had cautioned him not to attack Assam as this land was noted for its devotion and prayers to God Vishnu. Religious fanaticism, however, has never been a characteristic of Assamese society. If there was any conflict at any time, it was politically inspired. Hindus and Muslims have been good neighbours in this part of India. In fact, Muslim settlers in this land even fought against Moghul invaders. Assamese people are placid, easy-going, and would lose rather than be aggressive. Only when things become intolerable after prolonged endurance do they sometimes flare up.

BIHU : A NATIONAL FESTIVAL

This tolerant and easy-going nature has given to the Assamese a 'national' festival which is not religious in the Hindu sense. The springtime Bihu (from Sanskrit *Vishuvam*) with its house cleaning, wearing of new clothes, social visiting, dances and songs is enjoyed by all sections of the people, tribal or non-tribal. In origin a non-Indian fertility festival, it has

now combined in certain cases Hindu religious ideas and cattle worship (bathing, feeding, etc.). At one time probably the festivities were held in March but they have now gathered around the *Vishuva Samkranti* day, the festivities lasting a week. Now-a-days, with the break up of the older social patterns, Bihu has tended to turn into big variety shows, demonstrating on the stage the popular forms of dance and music that are found among the various sections of the people. The joyfulness of the festival is echoed in the songs sung at this time :

Bihu this year is so glorious
the nahar is in blossom,
its fragrance so rouses my sweetie
While moving she tramples down
her spinning-wheel.

Note the allusion to the spinning wheel. Cottage weaving is common in Assam. Bihu songs describe beauty, express youthful yearning, glorify youth, speak of life's difficulties, hold up excellent poetic images and give glimpses in to various aspects of social life. Let me present here a few songs which express yearning :

To see you in a flash I am no lightning
nor am I a flowing river
to see you flying I am no bird
with two wings to my side.

A jacket suited to your body
parted hair suited to your head
a jewelled 'Keru' in your ear,
without sight of you
hardly a day can I pass
how to pass a whole year ?

I see you as I come,
I see you as I leave, dear
a sapling of the white 'Jamun',
being neither for swallowing
nor for putting on
You are but a torture to my eyes.

These anti-phonol quatrains number hundreds and hundreds. they are some of the finest folk poetry to be found any where in the world.

Bihu now is a cultural festival in which persons of various castes and creeds can and do conveniently participate. There is nothing exclusively Hindu in it. Assam's Hinduism, in fact, is a compromise between pure Aryan customs and rites and local Mongoloid practices. Respect for all kinds of work without any fear of losing caste, love for weaving and for colourful dresses, the durable *endi* and *muga* (gold coloured) silks, special dishes, like alkaline preparation of vegetable and fish and meat cooked with bamboo-shoot are some of the local contributions of Assam that should be appreciated by other parts of the country.

One can go on, but I believe this is enough to show that Assam too has things to contribute to the common culture and well-being of *Bharatavarsha* in which one is born only because of some merit in previous life—to borrow an expression from medieval Assamese poets.

THE CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION OF ASSAM

Dr. Tarun Chandra Sharma

The triangular landmass that lies to the east of Bengal delta and below the arc of the greater Himalaya presents a vast and unique green canopy with dissected physiognomic features characterised by rugged and wild hill ranges, deep gorges and narrow flat alluvial valleys which are drained by the mighty Brahmaputra, the *Lauhitya* of ancient India, the very dear *luit* for the children of mother Assam. The great river originates in western Tibet and brings down about five hundred million cubic feet of very fertile silt annually to be deposited in the foredeep between the Himalaya and the Meghalaya plateau and thence in the vast tract of Bengal delta. This is the Brahmaputra valley—a vast tract of fertile land which has nurtured from time immemorial a population, which in course of time came to be known as Assamese. According to the famous geographer O.H.K. Spate, the land called Assam has its own individuality both physically and culturally. Physically, it lies at the trijunction of Indo-Chinese, Indo-Malayan and the Indian sub-regions of the Orient. Climatically and vegetatively, Assam is more akin to southeast Asia than any other part of India. Ethnically, this region has absorbed since the prehistoric times hordes of Mongoloid population who entered Assam in successive waves from their homeland in Tibet, China, Thailand and beyond. The great Bodo race, considered to be the original settlers of the hills and the valleys of Assam, is believed to have come into this land from their original home in eastern Tibet. The Austries, whose modern descendants are the Khasis and the Jaintias of Meghalaya, are believed to have formed the

basic substratum of the population of northeast India and they have left deep imprints on the culture and civilisation of Assam. They were the megalithic builders of northeast India and they raised huge stone monuments in honour of the dead. The geographical position of Assam as a frontier state in the north eastern corner of a vast country has given to the state her special status and importance. She had retained her independence throughout her history right down to 1826 when she came under the British rule.

• Being remotely located from the heartland of India with a large backward aboriginal population, the echoes of the happenings in Assam reached other parts of India often very lately, that too, largely in distorted forms.

ASSAM AND INDIA

Yet Assam was never isolated from the rest of India as events from the Epic period of Indian history would prove. From the records in the Epics—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (dated c. +1000-800 B.C.) it is known that the north-eastern frontier Kingdom of India, a *Mlechha* territory ruled by the Bodo kings, referred to as *Danabas* and *Asuras* by the Aryans of the Ganga valley, was known as *Pragjyotisha* (the eastern land of Astrololgy) and later as *Kamarupa* with its central shrine of mother goddess *Kamakhya* on the Nilachal hill overlooking the mighty Brahmaputra within the present metropolitan complex of Gauhati. The kingdom was known as *Pragjyotishpura* since the time of Naraka, a prince from Videha in North Bihar, who established the first Aryan Kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley by subjugating its Asura ruler, *Ghataka* well before the Mahabharata war. His son Bhagadatta, who succeeded to the throne of Pragjyotisha, took part in the Kurukshetra war with his powerful army of *Kirata* and *Cina* warriors. Bhagadatta thus formed a significant symbol in forging the permanent relationship of the Brahmaputra valley with the rest of India. This historic event brought the non-Aryan kingdom of northeast India within the fold of the Vedic Aryan world round about 1000 B.C. As has happened to all parts of non-Aryan India, the door of the landlocked

isolated forested region of northeast India was opened permanently from this period for the onward march of the culture and civilization of Gangetic India. This brought in a process of integration of the non-Aryan tribes of the Brahmaputra valley under the influence of the ever expanding Hindu World, which had the Sanskrit language as its vehicle. In the process of Sanskritisation, the place names in the non-Aryan kingdom of the east were largely sanskritised. Brahmaputra and Lauhitya, the names of the great river of Assam and Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa, the names of the kingdom are the significant symbols of sanskritisation in the Brahmaputra valley.

In the *Puranas* and *Tantras*, the kingdom was known as Kamarupa. In the *Kalika Puranas* and the *Yogini Tantras*, the Sakti shrine of Kamakhya was recognised as the centre of Kamarupa and the kingdom was said to extend from the Karatoya river in the west to the river Dikrong in the far east corner of the valley and from the mountain of Khandagiri (the Himalaya) to the confluence of the Brahmaputra on the south. The kingdom thus included roughly, in addition to, the Brahmaputra valley, the northeastern districts of Koch Bihar, Jalpaiguri, Rongpur and Mymensingh of present day Bengal and Bangladesh. In other words, North Bengal and parts of East Bengal were ethnically, culturally and politically an extension of the Bodo land of Assam. The Aryanised Bodo population of this area, the Koch rose to the height of power under the great monarch, King Naranarayana of Koch Bihar during the sixteenth century. He exercised his power and ruled over a large Kingdom which extended from north Bengal to a large part of the Brahmaputra valley and the Barak valley extending from the modern district of Cachar to Tripura.

The earliest epigraphic reference to the kingdom of Kamarupa is found in the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta (c.350 A.D.). Here along with Samataka, Devaka and Nepala, Kamarupa is mentioned as a *pratyanta*, or frontier state outside the Gupta empire, but evidently in friendly and subordinate relation to it. Hiuen Ts'ang, the Chinese scholar-pilgrim who visited Kamarupa in about 743 A.D. on invitation of its monarch Kumar Bhaskaravarman, left a record of the

kingdom he called *Ka-ko-lu-po*. Kamarupa also figured in the writing of the Arab historian Alberuni in the eleventh century. It is therefore, clear that since the Epic period down to the 12th century A.D. the eastern frontier kingdom was known throughout *Aryavarta* both as *Pragjyotisha* and *Kamarupa* and the kings of Kamarupa called themselves Lords of Pragjyotisha.

INDIA'S GATEWAY

Assam formed the eastern gateway of India and the corridor for passage of peoples, commodities and ideas between the two great civilizations of the world—the Chinese and the Indian. The routes linking India to the Far East through the mountain passes, though hazardous, were utilized by the people mainly from the ever expanding Mongoloid world for migration as well as for trade and commerce and exchange of cultural traits. Since the prehistoric period onwards (c.4000 B.C.), the neolithic peasants from the Hwang Ho and Yangtze Kiang valleys were migrating to the hills and the valleys of north east India. These routes were extensively used for trade between China and India as well as the western world even before the famous Silk Route through Central Asia was opened. The *Periplus of the Erythraean sea*, 1st Century A.D. Greek account of Arabian Sea navigation and marine trade between India, and Egypt and the Roman world, gives indications of the trade carried on by the *Kiratas* or the Mongoloid inhabitants of Assam linking up India with Tibet and China with which they were familiar. The records left by the Chinese soldier explorer Chang K'ien, in the 2nd century B.C., speaks of a trade route from Assam to Southwest China through which Chinese goods like Silk cloth and bamboo flutes reached India on way to the western world. The famous silk industry of Assam which is still carried on as a principal cottage industry further confirms the age-old connection between Assam and China. This trade route was closed by the British at the end of the last century when alternative trade routes by the sea were more profitably developed.

During the seventh century A.D. under the great ruler Kumar Bhaskaravarman, Kamarupa rose to the height of power, culture and civilization. During his time the famous Chinese scholar Hiuen Ts'ang visited Kamarupa and the record he left of the kingdom is still regarded as the most valuable and oldest of all historical records of Assam, barring the references in the Mahabharata. Bhaskaravarman proved his friendship with the Chinese emperor by aiding his army with supplies of cattle, horses and accoutrements, when the latter invaded India to avenge the insult meted out to a Chinese envoy in the Court of Harshavardhana after the death of Sri Harsa. In those days T'ang China and Sassanian Persia were the two great civilizations in Asia with which India had direct contact and the contact with China was maintained by the land route through Assam. There were alternative routes to China and the Far East by the sea from the sea-port at Tamralipti, the present day Tamluk in Bengal, but the land-route was more preferred.

PERIOD OF GLORY

The seventh Christian century was a period of glory for the independent kingdom of Assam as it was for India. Harshavardhana, one of the most enlightened Indian rulers was administering Northern India and Kamarupa was in the able hands of Kumar Bhaskarvarman. A good deal of historical accounts of this period has come down to us through Bhaskarvarman's copper plate inscriptions, Bana Bhatta's *Harsacharita* and the notes left by Hiuen Ts'ang. Bhaskarvarman was the most powerful king in the east. He had subjugated even Sasanka, the king of Gauda or Bengal and his sway covered even the Surma valley including the present Sylhet area of Bangladesh where a land grant of the king has been found. By all standards, this period of Assam history can be viewed as the period of consolidation of the Hinduised Indo-Mongoloid empire in the northeast. Bhaskar was a great friend of Sri Harsa and was held in high esteem by him as evidenced by the accounts of great respect shown to him by

the Emperor of North India in his grand emperical march and assembly in Kanauj in honour of the Chinese scholar, Hiuen T'sang. In the grand march, Bhaskarvarman marched in state at the head of 500 elephants, clad in armour, along the north bank of the Ganges while Sri Harsa marched along the south bank, both keeping pace with each other. They reached Kanauj after a ninety day march. At Kanauj, daily processions were led by Bhaskarvarman and Harsa, dressed like Brahma and Indra respectively. When the Chinese scholar was taking leave of the kings after the grand assembly, Bhaskarvarman addressed him thus, 'If the master is able to dwell in my dominion and receive my religious offerings, I will undertake to found one hundred monasteries on the Master's behalf.' This proves the King's greatness as a lover of religions, art, culture and civilization. These virtues were also brought out by bringing in of a large number of Brahmins from the acknowledged cultural centres of north and central India and their settlement in the kingdom with generous land grants.

THE AHOMS

The British annexation of Assam in 1825 followed the atrocious incursions of the Burmese. The period prior to this was known as the Ahom period, which lasted for roughly six centuries from 1228 to 1826. The advent of Ahom in Assam was an event of great significance both for Assam and India. The Ahoms' coming to Assam can be linked with the general movement of the Thai group of people from south China during the early part of the century. This human movement led ultimately to the settlement of the Laos in former Indo-China, of the Thai proper or the Siamese in northern Thailand and the Shans in northern Burma. The Ahom were a branch of the Shans, the brave and hardy Sino Tibetan hillmen, who were recognised as the first cousins of the Bodos of Assam, and who set out in the second quarter of the 13th century in search of new and fertile settlements. They crossed the Patkai range which separates Assam from northern Burma, followed the

courses of the Luhit and Noa-Dihing rivers and reached the eastern limit of the Brahmaputra valley. The history of Assam during the Ahom period, roughly from 1200 to 1800 A.D., is characterised on one hand by the stabilization of the people of Assam with their language and culture as an Aryan speaking Hindu people and on the other by the stiff and successful resistance to Mohammadan aggressions from Bengal.

The Ahoms had brought to India a new speech (the Sino-Tibetan Thai speech) with a new script and their own culture, religion and civilization. But the greatness of the people lies in their broad mindedness in accepting Assam as the motherland by discarding their own speech, script and religion as well as their relationship with their ancestral homes in Shan state and by allowing themselves to be completely fused into the mainstream of Indian civilization. Bit by bit, the Ahoms conquered the whole of the Brahmaputra valley and brought under their tutelage not only their powerful Bodo predecessors and rivals like the Chutiyas and the Dimasas, but also the hill peoples like the Nagas and the Mikirs. During the days of their great glory (between 1680-1720 A.D.), they brought under their sway their erstwhile rivals, the Kacharis and the Khasis and the Jaintias as well. The only formidable resistance was offered by the Koches, the Hinduised Bodos in western Assam and north Bengal. The Koch kingdom under the leadership of its illustrious monarch Naranarayana and his brother Cila Rai or Sukladhvaja not only formed a great empire in the east India, but was also successful in keeping the Ahoms in check within their territory in central and eastern Assam. For about 450 years, the Bodos and the Ahoms vied with each other for supremacy and ultimately this feud led to a gradual merger of both the races into a single Assamese speaking people.

One of the most noteworthy events of Assam history is the thrilling story of spectacular resistance to the Mohammadan expansion from North India through Bengal, offered first by the Pala kings of Kamarupa (between 1250-1500 A.D.) and then by the Ahom Rulers. The first Mohammadan horde to enter Kamarupa consisted of the Turks led by Bakhtyar Khilji in 1205-06 A.D. and the incursion ended in a disaster for the

Turks, thanks to the superior military skill shown by the Kamrupa army on the bank of the Puspababhadra river, now called Barnadi, near North Gauhati. This was followed by persistent efforts on the part of the Muslim rulers of Bengal (Turks, Pathans, Moghuls as well as Rajputa under the Moghul army) to overrun the Brahmaputra valley, but none succeeded in subjugating the people of Assam. It was definitely a very significant event for the history of entire Asia that the Muslim power failed to penetrate into Burma, Tibet and beyond because of the exemplary valour, hardwork as well as excellent military and civil administrations of the Assamese. The Arab merchants and Muslim religious teachers could reach Malayasia and Indonesia only by the sea routes, as the land route for islamic expansion into the Far East was denied to them by the Ahom kings of Assam. Otherwise the history of the southeast Asian countries would have been quite different.

The Ahoms gave Assam her present name. The name Asam or Assam is derived from the name of the ruling race, the Ahoms (Ahom-Asam-Assam). Another noteworthy gift of the Ahoms to Assam is in the field of literature and history. The Ahoms were endowed with the rare sense of keeping historical records, they called *Buranji*, in Thai scripts and in sober prose, terse and to the point. They also brought to Assam the art and technique of making handmade paper from pulp. After the 17th century A.D the Ahoms gradually gave in to the ever growing influence of the Aryan Assamese, which brought about the final linguistic extinction of the Ahoms by the middle of the last century. Their speech no longer persists as a living speech in any part of the valley.

SIVAJI OF THE EAST

One of the most significant periods in the history of Assam was the period of Swarga-Deva Rudra Simha who was regarded as the 'Sivaji of Eastern India'. He was the son of Gadadhar Simha, whose consort Sati Jaymati Kuwari still inspires great sentiments in every Assamese heart because of her legendary courage at the face of untold torture perpetrated by unscrupulous

pulous power loving Ahom noblemen, and for her unflinching love and devotion to her husband who had absconded to escape the conspiracy of the Ahom nobles to deprive him of the throne. Jaymati did not fail the people and her husband but rather sacrificed her life. Naturally the people of Assam feel proud to sing of her greatness and she is reckoned as one of the noblest characters of Assam history.

The 18th century saw the gradual decline of political life in Assam. Court intrigues within the ruling family surfaced and ultimately lured in the Burmese invaders. In fact a high official himself invited them to invade the kingdom. They overran the State and held it from 1819 to 1824. It was a reign of terror marked by untold miseries for the people of the valley. The Burmese ultimately came into conflict with the British who were then in occupation of Bengal. Clashes followed and the British finally drove away the Burmese and brought the lower part of the valley under their sway in 1826. And that was how, for the first time in her history, Assam ceased to be an independent State.

The Britishers went on spreading their tentacles, and by 1899, the whole of what was Assam before partition came under the British rule. In 1921, Assam had acquired the status of a new and self contained state under a British Governorship. This helped the process of integration of the hills and the plains of northeast India. But the process seemed to receive a jolt in the nineteen sixties and seventies when most of the hill districts of Assam were separated from the mother state. However it was not long before the constituent states of northeast India could rediscover the fact that even their cultural and economical survival were conditioned by age-old traditional solidarity and mutual brotherhood.

FACE TO FACE WITH ALIEN VALUES

The British rule brought the people of Assam face to face with a new set of alien ideas and social values. For the first time, the population of this region came in contact with the language and religion of Europe. The Christian missionaries

made all out efforts to spread their religion and culture mainly in the tribal dominated backward parts of Assam which provided them with a fertile field. Within a short period, several tribal communities, till then following traditional animistic faiths, became attracted towards Christianity. This event brought some hitherto unknown groups in northeast India into the forefront as the vanguards of British imperial design and christendom. For the first time, innumerable tribal dialects of northeast India got their script—the Roman script or the script of the English language. The tribal dialects got their first literary expressions when Christian religious books were written in a large number of tribal dialects of this region with the Roman script.

Other events of far reaching consequence for the history and civilization of Assam during the British period are the inductions of (i) a whole host of Bengali clerks and petty officials into the administrative machinery of Assam; (ii) a large number of tribal population from Orissa, Bihar and Central India as a labour force for the newly established tea gardens in Assam; (iii) and traders from Rajasthan and other states in the field of trade and commerce of the State.

In the beginning of the British rule in northeast India, Assam was not in a position to provide English knowing personnel to help the British in running the administration of the State. This void was quickly filled up by the ever zealous British trained Babus from the well established British domination in Bengal. This event brought in its wake a host of problems for the people of Assam both in the hills and the plains and the peoples of this area are still reeling under its impact. The Bengali Babus were quick and clever enough to utilise their advantageous position as compatriots of the British administrative machinery. When the British with the Bengali Babus came to Assam, the chivalrous Assam-Ahom-Bodo power was in a disarray because of internal feud within the ruling class and the Burmese invasion which had depopulated the country to a large extent. Almost all the able bodied persons were either killed or taken away by the invaders as captives; the rest of the population fled to the hills and jungles to save their lives and

escape the atrocities of the Burmese. The Ahom acropolis at Gauhati, Gargaon and other places as well as the villages were reduced to barren lands. Taking the advantage of the misfortune of Assam, the Bengali Babus from their advantageous position as compatriots of the British administration started looking upon Assam as a backward part of Bengal and the Assamese language of the State as an uncouth dialect of Bengali. The use of the same script (excepting two additional alphabets for Assamese) and a very general agreement in grammar were largely taken advantage of while inducing the British Government to replace Assamese with Bengali as the language of the administration and the schools in Assam. However, the British soon realised their mistake and in 1873, the Lt. Governor of Bengal Sir George Campbell restored Assamese as the language of the schools and administration of the State.

The people of Assam started to react immediately when they could realise the evil design of the British Government in annexing Assam permanently to British India. The stories of the first liberation struggles carried on by the people of Assam under the leadership of Maniram Dewan and Piyali Phukan are still vivid. During the struggle for liberation of India under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, Assam carried the banner of revolution with its full vigour. But at the time of liberation of the country from the British Empire, the state of Assam almost fell prey to a grand evil design of the western imperialist power to retain a foothold in this strategic borderland with a large Europeanized tribal population. This they planned to do by separating Assam from India and gifting it to Pakistan. This sinister design was successfully foiled, otherwise the post-independent history of Assam would have been completely different. The induction of the Bengali Muslims from those areas of Bengal, which later constituted East Pakistan, was a part of the grand imperial design. Sir Mohammad Sadulla, the Chief Minister of the Muslim League Government of Assam in the pre-independence era, played into hands of the imperial power and encouraged large scale immigration of Muslims from East Bengal, who were given settlements in the low lying flood-plains of the Brahmaputra valley. At the time of partition

of India, large number of Bengali Hindus, scared by riots came to Assam as refugees and got citizenship of the country. But the saddest part of the story is that the grave danger of unchecked migration of lakhs of people from the former East Pakistan and present Bangladesh which became part of a foreign country after the partition was not fully realised. It will be the task of the future historians to assess the impact of this human migration upon the culture and civilization of this frontier state of India.

CULTURAL SYNTHESIS

The late Medieval period of Assam saw the formation of an Assamese speaking nation with independent existence in the Brahmaputra valley with its own regional individualities. During the period, the autochthonous Bodo race together with the Austric elements and the Ahoms were finally welded with the Aryan Hindu settlers of the valley into a single people—the *Asamiya* or the Assamese people. The Aryan Assamese speech had taken its shape at the beginning of this period from its parent source in Magadhi Prakrit and *apabhraṅsa* dialects brought by the Aryan settlers of the valley who came to Assam in successive waves from the Middle Ganga valley. While this unification was in process around a common language and culture under a powerful monarchical administration, the very fact of independent existence cut off Assam to a large extent from the mainstream of Indian civilization. The strong Mongoloid elements of Assamese race and culture also resisted full participation of the State in the Indian civilization. This speaks well for the cultural individuality of Assam which is undoubtedly a remarkable achievement of the mixed population of the Brahmaputra valley. As remarked by Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, this can be looked upon as Assam's great contribution to the synthesis of cultures and fusion of races in the formation of the great nation which is characterised like a cut gem by many facets among which the northeastern frontier facet is the most remarkable.

In the literary field, Assam had close connections with Mithila. The Mithila lyrics attained their highest perfection in the development of the Vaishnava devotional lyrics of Assam. It is a kind of Maithili mixed with Assamese and through this sweet lucid language the story of Lord Krishna's sportive characters were made popular in every household of the Assam valley by the great religious leader, Sri Sankar Deva, during the 15th and 16th centuries A.D. Sankar Deva, gave the people of Assam a new life and a distinctive personality. It was his remarkable achievement to evolve and propagate a new religious faith based on the doctrine of a single divinity, Vishnu, called *Eka Sama Dharma* in Assamese, in a land where the most powerful blood-thirsty Sakti cult, propitiated sometimes by human sacrifice, held sway for centuries. Because of this, Shri Sankar Deva is for the millions in Assam God-incarnate, an *avatar*, their most venerated Sankar Guru. He established many religious centres called *Sattras* or monasteries to propagate the new faith of *Bhakti* and *nama Dharma* or repeating God's name and singing his praises or mahimas (Kirtana) in congregational worships. The greatness of Sankar's philosophy is the doctrine of equality of man. The influence of Sankar Deva on the literature, religion and life of the Assamese people is comparable to that of Tulsidas, Sankaracharya, Ramanuja, Chaitanya Deva and other religious leaders and social reformers of late medieval India. He raised Assamese literature and society to a very high degree of excellence with his songs, hymns, drama and other works of Vaishnava religion and practices. The foundation of Assamese culture and civilization established by Sri Sankar Deva and his disciples rests on a solid base which will keep the structure of the Assamese society firmly fixed to its base for all the ages to come.

The vast field of arts and crafts that developed in Assam in different ages cannot be adequately treated in this brief passage. Many of the art pieces and architectures that adorned the Brahmaputra valley during the Gupta and Pala periods of Assam history were completely wrecked either by violent earthquakes or ravaged by Turk and Muslim invaders. The

whole valley is strewn with the ruins of Early and Medieval stone sculptures and stone and brick architectures. These speak well of the richness of Assam in Hindu art and architecture, which were executed in the Pan-Indian Hindu tradition which the valley shared fully with the rest of India. The Muslim invasions and the advent of the Ahoms led to a setback in art traditions in the late medieval Assam. During the Koch regime and the Ahom rule, many of the ruined temples including the temples of Kamakhya were reconstructed by using ancient art pieces and adding new materials. The Hinduised Ahom Kings built huge temples called Siva Dol and Joy Dol within their capital complex near the modern Sibsagar town in Upper Assam and dug a huge tank called Joysagar close by.

In the art of manuscript illustrations with miniatures paintings, Assam inherited the styles of Pala Miniatures of Bengal and Buddhist Miniatures of Bihar. Some of the miniatures illustrating the Assamese manuscripts are indeed charming. The miniature paintings in colour of the 15th and 16th centuries, namely, *Citra-Bhagavata* and *Sankhasura-Vadha-Kavva*, are some of the excellent examples of classical Indian miniatures that developed in the Brahmaputra valley. However, the most precious group of miniatures of 18th century, A.D. executed in court, and secular styles, which, "worth a king's ransom", are found in the manuscript called *Hasti-Vidyarnava* which depicts in beautiful pictures the art of catching elephants and the court life of 18th century Ahom kings and nobles.

There is another field of art—that is textile—including both cotton and silk weaving and embroidery decorations in which the Assamese women have always shown high artistic skill. Assam has the largest assortment of different kinds of silk, including the golden Muga silk and the durable and warm Endi silk. In medieval times, Assamese silk cloth of various kinds used to form distinctive objects offered as presents to kings and nobles in India. The excellence and special features of the silk and cotton textiles form undoubtedly one of the most beautiful expressions of the material culture of Assam.

MODERN PERIOD

The modern period of Assamese culture and civilization began roughly from the time of consolidation of British paramountcy over Assam in the last quarter of the 19th century. During this period, the wind of western education, ideas and way of life began to blow over the valley. It enabled Assam along with the rest of India to take part in the renaissance of culture and literature. Curiously, the centre of renaissance of Assamese literature was Calcutta. The University of Calcutta was then the only centre of western education and learning in the whole of Eastern India. Gauhati and Jorhat emerged as centres of modern literature and intellectual developments only in the first quarter of the present century. During the later part of the last century, a group of brilliant students from Assam who received modern education in Calcutta University successfully established Assamese as a modern Indian language.

It must be mentioned that Assamese intelligentsia in the renaissance period remained confined only to the field of literature, leaving the economic field of modern trade, commerce and industry of the land wide open for the conquering power, the British and their maiden associates from outside the State. The latter groups took full advantage of the patronage of the alien ruling power to dominate over the modern economic structure of Assam. The sons of the soil retreated to the background for multiple reasons of their ignorance of modern trade and industry and lack of opportunity and initiative when they came face to face with their more agile brothers from other States.

ASSAMESE LIBERALISM

Dr. Durgeswar Doley

Assam is one of the country's most colourful frontiers. Nature adorns her with the choicest colours. Colourful wild life and sonorous music of the winged minstrels further deepen her aura of mystery. And the human landscape is as colourful as Nature herself. Widely diverse ways of life, rhymes and rhythms unfurl before the mind's eye the thrilling story of evolution of a unique social and cultural identity through the process of assimilation of divergent races and cultures. Assam in fact presents a colourful socio-cultural mosaic. It is here, according to Prof. Hem Barua, that 'races and people from different corners and regions across its borders met and lived and in the process of time evolved a consolidated pattern with common traditions and aspiration. Through the long columns of history, people of different origin and ethnology migrated into this country, fought and rambled in its beautiful valleys and hills, and as the years rolled, fertilised its sinews and arteries into solid entity.

Assam has always been an enchanting land attracting to her hills and dales wave after wave of human migration from far beyond her borders. Swarms of migrants from distant regions have been coming here, since the beginning of human history and fought and fraternised on the banks of the red river and atop the picturesque hills. Some of the early settlers belonged to the Aryan and the Dravidian stocks and had entered the racial cauldron in course of their great countrywide movements. While the Brahmins and the Kalitas (Caste Hindus) of present Assam claim their descent from the earliest Aryan

settlers, the Kaibartas (scheduled castes) are believed to be the descendants of the first Dravidian immigrants. Assam was known to the rest of the country in the epic days as 'Kamarupa' and its capital as 'Pragjyotishpura' or the city of eastern lights. The inhabitants were the tribes known as the Kiratas, the Mlechas and the Cinas. The population in fact consisted of widely divergent tribal groups, some of whom had migrated from Northern Burma and some others from their distant central Asian homes. The evolution of the Assamese society thus has been a thrilling and lively story of peoples of different races passing through the processes of conflicts, conciliations and convergence into a plural society. The composite culture was slowly taking shape with strains in it of divergent cultures of the Aryans and the Dravidians, of the Austriacs and the Tibeto-Burmans. While the diverse cultures were all the time getting fused and mingled with each other, the process of their moulding into a single whole was further accelerated and completed during the reign of the Ahoms that began in the middle of the thirteenth century.

When the Ahom warriors crossed the eastern hills into Assam, the land was still divided into small kingdoms ruled by different tribal groups. The Chutiyas were ruling in the east, the Kacharis in the Central part and the Koches in the West. The Ahoms brought about political unification through their conquests and annexation of the tribal kingdoms during the early years of their rule that lasted for long six hundred years. And the enchanting land continued to draw fresh migrants. Even during the Ahom regime and more during the subsequent British days, large number of people from the neighbouring states of India also moved in through various forms of interaction and some of them settled permanently in the state. The process of assimilation being always active, the heterogeneous new comers with ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious affinities were readily accommodated in the fold of Assamese society. Gradually, Assam grew into India itself, in miniature though.

The present population of Assam can be classified into three broad categories, viz. the tribals, the non-tribal caste

Hindus and the Scheduled castes. The tribals consist of different ethnocultural communities such as the Miris, the Kacharis (including the Bodos), the Deoris, the Rabhas etc. The non-tribal group includes mainly the Ahoms, the Brahmins, the Kayasthas, the Kalitas, the Koches, the Morans, the Muttaks, the Chutias etc. The Basfors, the Boniyas, the Dhobis, the Dholis, the Hiras, the Kaibartas and the Namasudras etc. are included in the Scheduled castes. The immigration during the British days were mostly thrown up by Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and other parts of India. One of the major groups was that of the tea garden workers, collectively known as 'Baganiyas', who were brought from Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa by the British tea planters for employment in their estates during the later part of the last century. The 'Baganiyas', who now form an integral part of the Assamese society, belong to different communities such as Bhumij, Karmakar, Orang, Tanti etc.

Gradual fusion has been also behind the evolution of the religious system now prevalent in Assam. Animism, Tantricism, Hinduism, Vaishnavism—all have contributed to the development of the present religious system in Assam and have added to its basic catholicity of outlook and rare tolerance. Until the beginning of the 16th century, Assam was practicing, by and large, the Tantric forms of rituals. These forms of rituals however gradually yielded to the advent of the new Vaishnavite religion, initiated and propounded by Sri Sankardeva (1449-1568). The Vaishnavite religion, which cuts across caste and creed distinctions and is distinguished by catholic and liberal attitudes, is the main religion of the Assamese. The other major faiths are the Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and various tribal religions. The Hindus include also the tribal communities like the Kacharis, the Rabhas, the Deoris and the Miris etc. although some of them at the same time still maintain some of their own traditional beliefs and rites.

Hinduism in its pristine form developed in Assam as early as the first penetration of the Aryans into the region. But the Hindu caste system, as it is found at present, gradually

emerged only with the acceleration of immigration from the rest of the country. The tribal rulers in the earlier ages did not maintain any caste distinction. The Ahoms also introduced only their own system of social stratification purely for the purpose of administrative exigency. Monarchs and the princes of the ruling dynasty occupied the top hierarchical positions and the incumbents were recruited mainly from the Ahom families of royal descent. At the bottom of the order were the Paiks (foot-soldiers) and other common subjects. In between were several intermediaries, the position of each being clearly defined according to its function. The system was entirely different from the caste system in the sense that it was not hereditary and was also free from the concept of caste pollution. Individuals for the positions were recruited from different castes and communities only according to their worth and aptitude for the jobs.

The Assamese people do not show even now any dogmatism in respect of caste practices and inter caste relationships. Apart from uninhibited social intercourses among different castes, there are instances galore of caste mobility in the hierarchical order among the Assamese castes. People from the so called lower castes could move up to higher castes through matrimony, education or occupation. Even very recent sociological studies conducted by the Dibrugarh University among the rural communities have indicated that education, occupation and wealth are more important than caste or creed in determining one's social status and influence.

The Assamese society is, and has always been, an open society. The process of assimilation and fusion has always been alive and active and has embraced every ethnic, linguistic, cultural or religious group. Though the Aryanisation of the land in the remote past developed a society fundamentally based on Aryan ideas, the other non Aryan tribes, who existed there and who came since, were readily absorbed or got themselves assimilated in this general pattern of the social structure. Much was retained of each tribe, of its customs and traditions, but at the same time, much more was sacrificed. Out of this process of 'give and take' and of mutual assimilation

and appreciation developed a culture known as the Assamese Culture. Moreover, the mutual appreciation of each other and the interaction between the Aryan and the non-Aryan elements have enriched the fold of Assamese Culture. Furthermore, the different peoples, while establishing their settlements in Assam, were assimilated without much distinction with the earlier inhabitants and in fact each wave of influx of immigrants has brought in its train the staple of its own culture, only to be woven into the general texture of the culture of the soil.

Apart from its assimilative nature, Assamese society is based on the principles of liberalism, secularism and democratic functioning, as it evident in all spheres of social and cultural life in the state. These cherished values are reflected even in the religious sphere. Vaishnavism, which happens to have the largest following amongst the Assamese people, contains all the elements of liberalism. It believes in one God and considers all beings as his children. It gives social recognition to the common man irrespective of caste or creed or birth. Sri Sankardeva, who propagated this neo-Vaishnavite faith, had declared that 'in bhakti, there was no distinction of castes, high or low.' As a matter of fact, some of the principal disciples of the great seer had been recruited from different aboriginal tribes. One of his dearest and supreme disciples was Chand Khan, originally a Muslim. Vaishnavism thus infused into Assam's social structure liberalism and catholicity of outlook, broad humanism and wide democratic sentiments. The Satras Vaishnavite establishments the centres of learning and teaching of Vaishnavism were run in the most democratic way. The functionaries of the Satras were selected on the consideration of their good qualities, learning and erudition without any weightage on their caste affinities. The Satras are still being run democratically. The village Namghar (Chapel) which forms an integral part of the organisational network of the Vaishnava orders, is where men and women of all ages, castes and creeds still converge regularly to offer prayers or to take part in spiritual discourses.

The Muslims started coming in the early part of the thirteenth century. A mosque was established for them as far

back as in the thirteenth century itself at Hazo in the Kamrup district. Exchange of cultural traits between the Hindus and Muslims followed. During the British days, Christians and other religious groups migrated into Assam. The Christian missionaries under the patronage of the administration made systematic efforts to spread their religion, particularly among the tribal communities. Some tribals and tea garden workers were converted too but the bulk of the native Assamese people refused although without any violent resistance. There was no tension as tolerance was a vital tenet of Vaishnavism. The Assamese zealously followed Sri Sankardeva's advice not to show any hostility towards the adherents of other creeds and not to 'hurt others' religions. 'Censure not the followers of other faiths.' The seer had enjoined them to be guided by the principles of tolerance and catholicity while holding one's own even at moments of great provocations.

An interesting facet of religious tolerance of the Assamese Vaishnavite is that he allows celebrations of Durga, Kali, Saraswati and other pujas with idols although such practices are opposed to the neo-Vaishnavism he practices. He would not believe in idol worship but would ungrudgingly take part in organise community celebration of these Pujas. Prof. Hem Barua had concluded, that 'it would be wrong to divide Assam into zones of religious affiliations ; things overlap here. The juxtaposition is expressive of the spirit that actuates religious life here ; this spirit is a spirit of spiritual co-existence with animus towards none.' Hajo, a few miles off Gauhati, reflects this spirit of spiritual co-existence. It is a place of pilgrimage for Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists alike. Hindus offer prayers at the Hayagriha Madhava temple, Muslims gather there for a glimpse of Poa Mecca and Buddhists visit the place where, according to legends, Lord Buddha attained nirvana. Religious tolerance is also reflected in the usual behaviour of the common Assamese, who would take pride in the literary and spiritual standards of the Jikirs or the Assamese Muslim spiritual chants. Natural calamities, foreign invasions or such other predicaments clearly bring out the extent of fraternal feelings amongst the different religious groups.

learning. He borrowed substantially from the Maitheli language for his writings, which are still the Bibles for the Assamese. During the British rule, Bengalis from the neighbouring states brought in their language and literature. The Assamese literates have learnt the language not out of any necessity but out of zeal to taste their rich literature. The Assamese have never grudged the development of any language. There are a considerable number of Bengali and Hindi Schools in different parts of Assam for schooling of the children of these linguistic groups and the Assamese have never questioned the setting up of such schools. The conflicts which have erupted during the recent decades on the issue of language is mainly due to the apprehension that Bengali would dominate over Assamese as it was once doing during the British days when Bengali replaced the people's language as the court language and the medium of instruction. It would be wrong to say that the conflicts reflected any hatred of the Assamese for the Bengali language. Assamese again is a composite language with different peoples and tribes having contributed to the growth and development of the common speech. The language too has developed in the process of assimilation. The vitality of this process can be gauged from the example of Ahoms. 'They no doubt built a kingdom here but the pressure from the bottom enmasse was such that the captors, so far as linguistic and cultural history is concerned, became ultimately the captives. Finally, in course of time, they abandoned their own language and adopted and assimilated the language of the people they ruled. And the language was growing as a composite language, 'into which words of both Indo-Aryan and Indo-Chinese origins have made their way. Besides this, other Pre-Aryan and non-Aryan influences are discernible not only in loan words but also in point of grammar, syntax and pronunciation.'

Liberalism, the basic foundation of the Assamese society and culture, has facilitated complete adjustment of different ethnic groups with each other and adaptation of each other's cultural elements. The various tribes with divergent linguistic and cultural affinities are spread all over the state living in peace and harmony with the non-tribal communities. None

has ever tried to exploit or dominate another. The tribals not only learn Assamese as their lingua franca and medium of instruction but also borrow freely from Assamese vocabulary to their own languages. Assamese language too, as has been mentioned above, has freely borrowed tribal terminologies. And this sort of reciprocity is marked even in dress, food and other spheres of life.

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The whole structure of Assamese society is thus the embodiment of liberalism, tolerance and democracy. In the long course of their social history, the Assamese have never indulged in fanatical activities. This liberalism and catholicity have also infused into the Assamese mind the strong feelings of Indianeness. To quote Dr. S. K. Bhuyan, the pioneer Assamese scholar and historian, 'Assam's civilisation is catholic and universal. Though living in a sequestered region, the people have received ungrudgingly all the good things that the Gangetic valley has to offer. This open mindedness has brought Assam within the cultural hegemony of India without eclipsing its own inherent traditions and ideals. Assam is a very ancient country and has a civilisation of its own which if properly studied and understood will be an object of amazement and admiration'

THE PRIDE OF BEING AN ASSAMESE

Dr. Mohammed Taher

Professor A.J. Rose of Mac Quarie University, Sydney, was standing atop the Bhubaneswari peak, when his eyes fell on the vast stretch of deep blue water flowing gently down below. His face suddenly brightened up and almost with a feeling of ecstasy, he said : 'This mighty river should give you pride and unity'. The aged professor, having had spent all his life in studying social geography in different parts of the world could definitely understand the language and the spirit of the elements of the physical environment, as also their impact on human society. 'Yes', I said, 'it has been giving, since man first came to live on its banks.'

We do not know for certain when exactly the first man came to live on the bank of the mighty river nor whence he came. In order to know him, one has to study first the influence of geography on population distribution in the early periods of human history. The three mountain knots of the old world—the Caucasus knot, the Palmir knot and the Eastern Himalayan or the Lohit knot—have also been the cross roads for human migrations. Naturally these knots have sheltered different groups drawn from widely diverse human hives. The Lohit knot had been the cross road of the Austroloid and the Mongolian migrations from the east and the north-east and the Aryan migrations from the west. The Northeast of India, which skirts the Lohit knot, thus has been the meeting place of people having diverse racial, linguistic and social affinities.

Thus the history of human distribution and redistribution gave this region a population mosaic a like of which is rare in many parts of the world. Historians and archaeologists have inferred from whatever scanty evidences they have been able to lay their hands on that a group of people speaking a branch of the Men Khmer language were the earliest settlers in what constitutes the present state of Assam. They were followed by the groups of the great Bodo stock from the north-eastern direction. Then came the Aryan migrants from the west—from the middle Gangetic plain—carrying with them the Aryan socio-cultural traditions, modes and values as also the Sanskrit-based language that gradually developed into the present Assamese speech.

These three groups of people provided the basis for the evolution of the Assamese community and established the Kamarupa and the Pragjyotisha kingdoms of epic fame. The dynamics of community formation however still continued to be active. The kings and the feudal lords continued to encourage migration of Brahmins, *Grahapras* (astrologers), *Kayasthas* and others from *Aryavarta*, not for religious education and social guidance alone but for economic reasons as well. Migration from the east and the northeast also continued. The Bodos, who had settled in the upper Brahmaputra valley became Hinduized and came to be known as Chutiyas. The Mishings started trekking down the present Arunachal hills along the Subansiri rivers and settled on the plains. In the early thirteenth century came the Ahoms from the Shan State across the Patkai range and established their sway over Upper Assam. While gradually extending their suzerainty, the Ahoms at the same time started adapting themselves to the local socio-cultural milieu and finally got assimilated. Migration of upper caste Hindus continued in small groups throughout the mediaeval period. Movement of similar small groups of Tai-Shan people from Upper Burma, who were later to be identified as the Khamtis, Deodhais, Aitonias, Phakials and Singphos etc. also continued. During the mediaeval period small groups of Muslims, who accompanied the Moghul and Pathan invading forces either as soldiers and craftsmen and were taken

prisoners of war, also started settling permanently. The first such group of settlers came with Turbak (1535 A.D.) and it was followed by similar sporadic waves in the later years till the time of the Moghul incursions during Aurangzeb's reign in Delhi.

BIRTH OF A COMPOSITE SOCIETY

By the time Assam was annexed to the British empire, the different groups of people had developed themselves into a composite peaceful peasant society. The total population of present Assam at the time of annexation was around 8 lakhs only. The annexation brought about a radical change in the socio-economic pattern of the state. The Britishers brought Bengali clerks, translators, scribes, surveyors, pharmacists and other workers as well as Gorkha soldiers to man their posts. Most of the newcomers subsequently settled in the state and also brought in their kiths and kins to the new found lebensraum. Another significant impact on the demographic situation was made by the discovery of tea bushes in Upper Assam in the 1820s, exactly at a time when the British traders were denied Chinese tea. By 1835, the Britishers had seriously organised plantations and each year saw swarms of labourers from Chotanagpur, Orissa and Andhra entering the state. The labourers too, on the expiry of their service tenures, started settling around the gardens. Another important event was the migration of Marwari business men in the wake of the state's changeover from subsistent barter economy to money economy that followed the annexation. For all intents and purposes they too started settling down in the then emerging towns, administrative headquarters, nascent commercial centres and tea gardens. These developments were convincingly reflected in the first ever census of 1872, which recorded a total population of 21 lakhs in Assam. It included, besides the indigenous population, a substantial number of people speaking Bengali, Nepali, Rajasthani and Central Indian tribal dialects. But the state's demographic structure was to undergo a still more significant change in the next few decades. The

construction of railway lines and discovery of petroleum in Assam in the 1880's and the 1890s inspired fresh influx from outside the state, especially from Bengal. It was during this period that the Zamindars of Goalpara also sponsored unofficial and limited migration of peasants from the eastern part of Bengal to their vast lowlying vacant areas in order to enhance their revenue income. Once the process started, there was practically no end to it. The peasants from eastern Bengal, ninety percent of them Muslims, started moving into the state in an endless stream.

Between 1921 and 1945, this migration was at times even encouraged and patronised by the then provincial government. The tacit politically motivated patronage of the League ministry was in fact always there. And the partition of the country a few years later led to the great exodus of Hindu refugees as also some Muslims from the then East Pakistan. This was in addition to the immigration of Nepalese and the inter state movements from the rest of the country.

By 1971, Assam's population rose to 146.25 lakhs registering a record increase of 34.95 percent as against the country's average of 24 percent. It has been estimated that while 75 lakhs of the state's population are of indigenous origin, the immigrants account for 71 lakhs. They include 24 lakhs of immigrant Muslims, 12 lakhs in-migrant tea labourers, 13 lakhs of Hindu refugees from East Bengal and 2 lakhs of Nepali settlers. The remaining 13 lakhs are Indian citizens from other states. According to the 1961 census, 61 percent of the people spoke Assamese, 20 percent spoke Bengali, 6 percent Hindi, 3.5 percent Bodo dialects, 2 percent different central Indian tribal dialects, 2 percent Karbi, 1 percent Mishing and the rest spoke various other dialects and languages.

A RACIAL CAULDRON

It is thus evident that Assam has attracted widely diverse racial and linguistic groups from far and near. Assam has in fact been a melting pot of socio-cultural diversities since the earliest times. As far back as in the early part of the first

millenium AD and perhaps even earlier, Shaivism was in vogue in Assam. The local people however remoulded it to suit their natural environment. That was how the Kiratas or the people of the Bodo stock came to propitiate Lord Shiva through sacrifices of pigs and fowl and offerings of rice, rice-beer and other locally available items. Shaivism was the regional faith in Kamarupa when Narakasura, the prince from Mithila, brought in the Sakti cult. It is interesting to note that Shaivism and Sakti cult began to flourish together in the ameliorating social atmosphere and beside every Shiva temple that existed since earlier, a temple dedicated to the Devi also sprang up. The religious open-mindedness was such that even worship of Lord Vishnu was propagated without generating sectarian conflicts amongst the Chutiyas, who were ardent Devi worshippers with their sanctum sanctorum at the Tamreswari temple of Sadiya.

TOLERANCE AND UNDERSTANDING

Such tolerance and understanding were cherished values in the Assamese society even thousand years back. Such egalitarian social and religious values came to be the accepted norms in the society at the behest of the great social reformer and religious leader Sri Sankardeva, who preached neo-Vaishnavism in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. His Vaishnavism was practical, secular and simple. Its secular basis was expressed in the seer's maxim ; *Bhakatita nahi Jati Ajati Bichar* (caste is no consideration in the matter of devotion). Sri Sankardeva had amongst his direct disciples not only people drawn from various Hindu castes but also one Chand Sai (Chand Shah), a Muslim, and one Narottam, a Naga. The *Namghars* or the community centres for propagation of Vaishnavism were thrown open to people of all castes. The *Bhawona* or folk drama of mythological significance, which Sri Sankardeva made a medium for propagation of his faith, was enacted by persons belonging to different castes. His *Nam-Kirtan* (devotional song) had such genuine appeal that Asan Fakir or Syed Shah Milan, who came here in the seventeenth

century to preach and revitalize Islam, took to composing *Zikirs* (devotional songs) in similar tunes and rhythms. The *Zikirs* gradually grew into a valuable asset to the Assamese folk culture and brought about greater understanding between the two religious communities.

To correctly understand the liberal social milieu of Assam one has only to see how the rigours of the caste system mellowed down here to such a degree that neither residential segregation on the basis of caste hierarchy, nor defilement of temple by entrance of low caste people was conceived of, let alone untouchability playing any role in the society. Even the Brahmins, who had mostly come from Kanauj, took to less orthodox practices in respect of food, dress and work habits. An interesting socio-religious feature in Assam is the existence of a couple of 'open castes' in the Tribal Hindu social continuum, to which the Hinduised tribals belong. A Garo or a Bodo tribal, who accepts Hinduism, becomes a '*Sarania*' by taking '*Saran*' or '*Diksha*' (proselytisation) from a Guru. He gives up certain tribal social customs and food habits, takes a Hindu name and is elevated to the Koch caste in course of time. Similarly, a Hinduised Mishing or Deori tribal could in the past claim to be a Chutiya and thus get into the fold of indigenous Hindu society. The 'Koch' and the 'Chutiya' are thus two open castes, that facilitated integration of the tribals into the broad Hindu fold with no stigma whatsoever left on them. This is certainly an interesting social phenomenon, a like of which is perhaps not easily found anywhere else. Assam could throw up such a process only because of the rare catholicity of outlook that distinguishes her social life. It is again because of this liberal social atmosphere shorn of sharp caste differences that Assam has a much lower percentage (6.10) of Scheduled Caste population compared to that (14.59) of the country as a whole. And it is precisely because of the same social values that inspite of Assam having a large proportion (11 percent as against 6.93 per cent in the country) of indigenous tribal population, there has never been social clashes and conflicts between the tribals and the non-tribals. It is rather interesting to see that in the wake of the Hinduization

process, a large number of local tribal deities were renamed and identified with Hindu gods and goddesses. The famous Kamakhya temple itself is said to have been a holy place for the Austro-Asiatic people in days of yore. The synthesis of religious attitudes in the region ultimately reached such a stage that a large number of *Thans* (Hindu shrines) and *Mazars* (graveyard of Muslim saints) came to be regarded with equal reverence by all sections of people. It is perhaps only in Assam that one comes across a place like the Garudachal hillock, which is a common place for pilgrimage for three great religions. Hundreds of Hindus and Buddhists visit the Hayagriva Madhava temple while hundreds of Muslims also come there to see the Poa-Mecca shrine and the *Mazar* of Ghiasuddin Awalia.

The Koch Kings who claimed to draw their lineage from Lord Shiva and ruled the western part of Assam for more than three centuries, renovated and also constructed a large number of both Shiva and Devi Temples and thus helped Hinduism adopt to the physico-social milieu of Assam. And it were the same Koch Kings, who patronised propagation of Sri Sankardeva's neo-Vaishnavism by helping the seer and his followers to establish *satras*, *thans* and *satsang maths*.

Similarly the Ahoms, whose greatest achievement was the bringing about of a common and sustained hegemony over the Brahmaputra valley and a sense of nationhood, displayed equally liberal attitude and outlook. Although they had normally patronised Shaivism by constructing new temples and renovating the old ones, the successive Ahom kings ungrudgingly patronised Vaishnavism too by zealously establishing *Satras* and allocating large areas of revenue-free land, along with peasants, for their maintenance. These Ahom kings even allowed Muslim soldiers and craftsmen, who had been taken prisoners during their wars with the Moghul invaders, to settle in Assam with honour and as equal citizens. The *Zikirs* say that one of the Ahom kings even dedicated a plot of land and built a *Moth* (a shrine with elevated floor) to help Azan Fakir institute his formal discourses for propagating Islam in Assam.

A COMMON NATIONHOOD

I have touched upon only a very few aspects of the basic structure of the Assamese society to give to the readers a glimpse of its racial, religious and social diversities as also the thread of unity that fertilise and weave them into a composite whole. The socio-cultural personality of Assam has in fact evolved with contributions of all indigenous and immigrant peoples—who have made Assam the homeland and have merged their separate identities into the common Assamese nationhood.

The contributions of the late Ananda Chandra Agarwalla and Chandra Kumar Agarwalla, who were of Rajasthani descent, as their surnames indicate, to the modern Assamese literature in its formative stage are acknowledged and remembered with gratitude by every Assamese. Rupkonwar Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla, the doyen of modern Assamese culture, was also of similar ancestry. He enriched the Assamese mind and almost every branch of modern Assamese culture. And who bothers now as to what his descent was? The basic tenet of the Assamese society is that anybody who accepts and imbibes the cherished ideal of unity that pervades the Assamese society is an Assamese, whatever be his caste or creed, language or land of origin and economic background.

It may be noted here that nowhere in India the tribals have made a larger contribution to the language, literature, music, social customs and traditions of a state than in Assam. Apart from providing the substructure of Assamese culture, the tribals have essentially been equal partners with others through the entire length of the history of Assam's growth and development. Who can think of modern Assam without Late Bishnu Prasad Rava? Himself a tribal with the great Bodo heritage, he dedicated his whole life to the rediscovery of the soul of Assamese culture and its enrichment. Similarly, the contributions of the Ahoms to the development of language and literature, art and architecture of Assam have been immeasurable. The Muslims too, inspite of their basically alien religious thinking, could successfully imbibe the mellowed

Assamese ideal of unity. Every Assamese remembers with pride the historical records which show how Muslim craftsmen and soldiers made and repaired cannons and guns for the kings of their adopted land and how they fought valiantly against the subsequent Moghul invaders. Their contribution to the language, literature, art and culture of the state is of no mean degree either. It is said that the services of one Dilbar, an artist from Delhi, were requisitioned for illustrating the *Hastividyarnava*, a treatise on elephant catching operation in mediaeval Assam. The Karbis, the Mishings, the Lalungs and the Dimasas, apart from the Bodos, the Kacharis and their sub-tribes, have made equally significant contributions towards the building of the foundation of Assamese culture, on which was superimposed the Aryan culture brought by the Hindu migrants in the past without giving rise to any social imbroglio. What gradually emerged in the process was certainly not a cross-breed of social systems, but a harmonious cultural entity, a colourful mosaic of diverse traditions and cultural traits, which was enriched further by fresh contributions in subsequent ages.

Professor Rose is right in choosing the great river as the apt symbol of the unity, confidence, pride and greatness of the people who live on its banks, for it does bear a parallel with the said stream of humanity, fed by diverse tributary groups that move in unison through thick and thin. One who lives on the bank of this mighty river and comprehends the ideals symbolised by it is an Assamese and there lies the pride of being one.

THE ASSAMESE FOLK MIND

Dr. Birendranath Datta

The folk mind being something that both fashions and is fashioned by the socio-culture conditions, the Assamese mind could be best studied against the background of the distinctive features of the traditional Assamese socio-cultural milieu.

The Assamese society is very much of an open society, the openness being inherent in the very process of its formation : fusion of different indigenous communities, chiefly of the tribal stock, with waves of settlers and invaders from other parts of India—and even outside (as in the case of the Ahoms who have given the land and the people their name)—at different periods of history. While assimilation and fusion are known to have played their role in the evolution of the Indian people as a whole, what is striking about the Assamese society is that they are very much at work even in the present day : fresh elements, both indigenous and non-indigenous, are constantly being admitted into the fold of the Assamese society and culture—may be imperceptibly in the case of individual families and small groups, but quite conspicuously in the case of bulk entries.

Thus within the broad Indian framework—characterised by the Sanskrit-linked Assamese language and many 'sanskritised' social institutions, customs and beliefs—the Assamese society, with its predominantly Indo-Mongaloid tribal basis, has been remarkably accommodative and liberal. This spirit of liberalism, flowing naturally from the compositeness of the ethnic complex,

was effectively sublimated and channelised by the great medieval vaishnava Saint-reformer Sankaradeva, the influence of whose soul-lifting catholic teachings has been most far-reaching and abiding on the Assamese society.

Take for instance, the attitude towards religion and things religious. Assamese Vaishnavism is marked by a high degree of restraint and dignity and thus the bulk of the Assamese who are followers of this faith are free from the excesses of religious passion, and are not unduly preoccupied with niceties of ritualistic performances.

Yes, the Assamese do have their share of beliefs in ghosts and spirits, magic and augury and the like. But in Assam there are not many deeply entrenched local cults as accretions to the Hindu faith as, say, in neighbouring Bengal. Neither to the *brata* type rituals dominate the Assamese Hindu's folk life. Similarly, so far as the Assamese Muslims are concerned, their religion has never conflicted with their Assamese way of life. Assamese 'Zikirs' (Muslim religious songs), modelled on the traditional Assamese folk modes, both literary and musical, provide an excellent example of the working of religious synthesis at the folk level. The fact that in the Assamese society there has never been any communal clashes on religious ground is an index of the degree to which the Assamese folk mind has been free from religious closed-mindedness.

Thus it is that the two biggest Assamese festivals, the Bohag Bihu and the Magh Bihu, are basically non-religious in character. The first, coming at seedtime and heralding the New Year, is symbolic of the spirit of springtime, of the joy of life, of youth and of love; and the second, coming after the harvest, is associated with enjoyment through feasting and community bonfires. With such universality of appeal, these festivals are not only open to, but actually belong to, all sections of the society.

Another manifestation of the liberalism of the Assamese folk mind is to be found in the attitude taken in regard to the caste system. Not that the caste system does not operate in Assam; but caste rigidity has never been a feature of the

Assamese society. Untouchability has been practically unknown and caste-based disabilities have been the minimum. In fact, except in the case of Brahmins and one or two other 'higher' castes, caste positions have not been too well-defined here and inter-caste communication at all levels has been fairly easy. Even in the field of matrimony, caste bars have normally not been unsurmountable.

If you so desire and I so desire,
What can the Kalita caste do?
(*toro mane gole moro mane gole*
Ki kariba kalita kule)

Thus goes a popular Bihu folksong. The implication is obvious.

As indicated above, the Brahmin has his high place in the society. But compared to the modes of life followed by Brahmins elsewhere, the Assamese Brahmin's life-style might appear to be very 'un-Brahminic'. The Assamese Brahmin has no scruples about doing all kinds of physical work except ploughing and he will have nothing to do with vegetarianism. Even then, the Assamese folk mind has not taken kindly to the privileges enjoyed by the Brahmin, as is evidenced by many folktales in which the low-caste attendant (*ligira, bahuwa*) of the Brahmin gets the better of his high-caste master. The Brahmin priest is also the butt of ridicule of many folksongs, particularly marriage-songs of the lampooning type.

Another peculiarity of the traditional Assamese society—which is yet one more reflection of the freedom of the Assamese folk mind from caste inhibitions—is the fact that trades and professions with one or two exceptions, have not been organised on caste lines. In fact, people belonging to all castes have traditionally done all kinds of work. For example, till the other day, there were no professional barbers in most Assamese villages, and anybody having a rusty pair of scissors did the barbering for his neighbours. Thus, almost every family had procured its own food crops from its own land (when the family possessed enough land) or by working on other people's land (when it didn't), woven most of the clothe

needed by it in the family loom or looms (with Assamese women weaving is a labour of love), fashioned most of the implements and receptacles needed in day-to-day life from the abundantly available bamboo and wood, etc., and only a few other essential necessities had been procured from the craftsmen and the traders, often by barter. One could even say that the Assamese folk mind has normally betrayed a kind of dislike of, if not aversion to, trades and professions. (There are very few successful Assamese traders even today).

It is significant that the Assamese village folks do not worship goddess Lakshmi for profits and the accumulation of wealth; the 'Lakhimee' of the Assamese has always been associated with crops grown in the field. The good man eulogized in a popular Assamese wise saying is the cultivator (*supurush kirishana*). And the aspirations of a young man who hopes to marry the girl of his choice and settle down in life are expressed in a Bihu song in no uncertain terms:

"You would go with your planting and reaping,
I with my ploughing;
You would set about weaving the Bihu towels,
I would make you the looms."

(*tumi kori jaba rowani dawani
maino kari jam hal,
tumi lagai jaba bihure gamocha
maino pati jam sal*).

Not to speak of engaging seriously in trade and business, the average Assamese has been loath to venture out and exert himself even to acquire some necessity "going cheap" A proverb brings out this attitude:

Salt is cheap at Habung (a salt-making centre)
But at what cost to one's person,
(*habungat lon sasta
dehar ba ki abastha*.)

The bulk of the Assamese village folk has not been guided by considerations of "doing better" They have remained contented if they have had enough provisions to see them

through the year. The position is aptly described by the popular expression, "neither paucity, nor a store of surplus" (*akalo nai bharalo nai*). Parenthetically, the absence of the dowry system in the Assamese society is perhaps of a pattern.

The reason for all this may be that life here has been rather easy: land has been plentiful and fertile, and the population sparse, and one did not have to toil hard to eke out a living.

With all this background, the Assamese has been a lover of his home, of his village and of his land—a land where nature is so bountiful and so ravishingly beautiful. Perhaps it is through his communion with the beauty of nature that the Assamese has developed his love for the beautiful and the artistic. The artistic bent of the Assamese folk mind is manifested in the wonderful home-made Assamese textiles, exquisite in their design, colour and texture, in the tastefully fashioned basketry, in the simple yet dignified architectural design of the community prayer-halls, in the aesthetically pleasing woodcarvings and paintings and above all, in the great variety and richness of the items of folk song, dance and drama. Most representative of the artistic creativity of the Assamese folk mind are perhaps the Bihu songs which, apart from being woven into captivating melodic and rhythmic patterns, are also pieces of great lyrical beauty. A couple of specimens will tell their own tale:

"To see you in a flash I am no lightning,
Nor am I a flowing river;
Flying to see you I am no bird
With two wings to my sides."

(*chamakat chabaloi nahao mai bijuli
nahao mai boati noi,
charayo nahalo uri galoheten
dukashe dupakhi loi*).

"The chrysanthemums blossom in your garden
Their shadow falls on mine
All day I think of you,
At night my body burns."

*(tomar barit phulile indrajit malati
mor barit porile chha
dinare dinti tomaloi dhauti
rati puri mare ga).*

The basic tribal connections, the ideal of 'limited want' self-sufficiency, the land tenure system where the evils of zemindary have been absent, a tradition which has been free from religious extremism and casteism, and a healthy love for nature and beauty—all these have combined to give the Assamese folk mind a kind of pride and independence that is associated with the dignity of the individual. As there is a germ in every corn, so there is a mind in every human being' (*dhantoe pati kanto, manuhtowe pati manto*)—this popular proverb reflects the essentially democratic recognition of the individual's will. Coupled with it is the correspondingly democratic tradition of recognising the combined wisdom of the community. True, there have been among the Assamese big landowners (*matigiri*), officers (*bishaya*) and other notable personages (*dangariya*), but it is not these persons in their exalted positions who have automatically drawn the respect and adulation of the common Assamese folk. It is rather the *raij*—the public, the people, the community in its organised wholeness—which has been the object of faith and veneration. (Till this day, even the most influential and respectable persons would formally and publicly bow down with bent knees (*athu lowa*) to the *raij* or the *samuh* (the aggregate) on particular occasions, make respectful offerings to it and seek its blessings.) How nicely this distinctive tradition is brought out in the maxim which says that "it is the community which is the king and the kinsmen who are the Ganga" (*rai jei raja gyatiyei ganga*). And what wholesome faith in the possibilities of the joint efforts of the community is revealed through this one: "A river flows when the community shakes its fingers" (from the drops of water falling from them). The following one is even more revealing. "When the king dies, the people will remain; but when the people themselves die, who will remain?"

*(swargadeo morile raij khan thakiba
raij mori gole thakiba kon)*

Of course, the need for an effective central political authority, as represented by the king, had not been lost sight of; for, the absence of such an authority would mean anarchy and disorder. This is the subject matter of another proverb: "There is no king on the throne and you get thrashed on the public road" (*raja nai patat, dhorilay batat*). Yet how deeply folk wisdom gets at the truth that uneasy lies the head that wears the crown:

The king's head has a golden crown on it.
And yet the king knows no sleep:
The poor men wrap themselves up in rags
But they sleep with complete unconcern.

*(rajar murate sonare kiriti chakute topani nai
dukhiva mchalai pindhe phatakani phosphos topani jav.*

And the sensitive mind could not but be struck by, and marvel at, the gems of deep observation and wisdom flashing through specimens of folk literature composed by simple village folk. Take this piece from a ballad: "The cloth woven by the weaver has covered the whole world, and yet the weaver goes bare-bodied." (*tatire kapore jagatkhan jurile tathapi tatir ga udi*). Could there be any doubt about where the sympathy of the folk composer lay?

VALUES THE ASSAMESE STILL CHERISH

Sri Pradeep Dasgupta

Kamarupa was the land of *Yogini-Tantra* and a centre of mysticism. This helped the rise of a canard about Assam, which was still in circulation as late as even during the British rule. It was that people coming to visit this land of antiquities and antics seldom returned home and "staying here over three nights, were converted into sheep".

That people were turned into sheep was, obviously, gimmick. But the canard unmistakably underscored the point that many who came to *Kamrupa* or Assam did not go back. And, this was plausible. For, Assam, with its blue hills and red rivers, lush green meadows and magnificent forestry, rare fauna and exotic flora as well as its temperate climate, has traditionally enticed people from everywhere.

Indeed, '*Yogini-Tantra*' refers to Kamarupa as the place "where even gods desire to die, not to speak of human beings". The Khasis, who have now christened their land as "Meghalaya", were among the earliest migrants into Assam. But one of their legends says that their forefathers came down from the heaven to live on this land, enchanted by its beauty and bounty.

During his numerous visits to Assam, Nehru never missed an occasion to praise the natural beauty of this land. Writing for '*Young India*' from Tezpur on the bank of the Brahmaputra, Mahatma Gandhi said in 1921: "Assam is a land of magnificent vegetation. Some of the river scenery are hard to beat throughout the world. I have seen the gorgeous scenery of the Thames. But I cannot recall anything as superior to the lavishness with

which Nature has decorated the great stream on whose banks I am writing these notes"

If Assam is known to be a land of *lahe-lahe*' (procrastination), where things take shape slowly and belatedly, it is because the beautiful land and its bountiful Nature have a sedative effect. Away from the humming busy world outside, even Time seems inclined to have a brief siesta here amidst the calm and congenial surroundings of the hills, melodious songs of birds and rippling rhymes of the rivulets. An ancient land though, Assam, incidentally, is still an abode of numerous aboriginals, shut out for centuries together from the moving world outside and still pursuing their primitive cultures and traditions.

HOSPITALITY

And, what, besides the bounteous Nature and topographical panorama, has through centuries attracted visitors to Assam is, indeed, the cordial hospitality of the indigenous denizens here shown individually or collectively. Time is moving, though with no rapid strides here, and changing with it are the moods and emotions of the people. A new awakening is taking place everywhere in the north-eastern region. Assam's history is essentially a glorious record of integration and assimilation of various streams of people at various times, making the territory a true epitome of Rabindranath's "Bharat-tirtha". All these are to be attributed to the broad-hearted hospitality of the people here.

This hospitality is traditional in Assam. Available records show that when Hiuen Tsang, the Buddhist pilgrim from China, came to the capital of the Hindu king of *Kamarupa*, Bhaskara Barman, the latter made liberal provisions for music, banquets and religious offerings in honour of the pilgrim who was the king's guest for about a month. The king did not want to bid a farewell to the pilgrim and had in fact a tiff with the king of Kanauj on this account. And after Hiuen Tsang's return to China, Bhaskara exchanged envoys with that country.

Chakravarty Rajagopalachari, who came to Assam for the first time in 1922 and was a guest at the house of Tarun Ram Phookun at Gauhati, noted : "Mr. Phookun was not there, for he had gone back to prison after his parole was over. His sister and Mrs. Phookun and other ladies of the family welcomed us with 'uludhwani' according to time-honoured custom and little girls sang a national song as we came up"

COURTESY

"I have always loved and sought for beauty", said the late Dr. Verrier Elwin, noted anthropologist, "and here in Assam I have been intoxicated with the delight of the natural scene, the grace and charm of the people and also with a certain beauty in human relationships. Although I have travelled in many countries, I have never found so much courtesy and friendliness in ordinary people".

During his first visit to Assam in 1937, Nehru was travelling from the Brahmaputra Valley to the Surma Valley in a train. In the North Cachar Hills, which link the two Valleys, gatherings of people came to welcome him at small stations, "many tribal folk with gracious gifts of fruits, flowers and cloth woven by themselves and fresh milk. Bright-eyed Naga children gave me garlands to wear"

The above are but a few instances from the hospitality galore of the people of Assam, which is still evident amply and which, I believe, is an endowment of the land itself—a spirit inculcated by the hailing Nature. Assam, which during the British rule covered nearly the whole of the north-eastern region, was originally known as Pragjyotishpura and subsequently Kamārupa. While Pragjyotishpura of the days of *Mahabharata* stretched southwards as far as the Bay of Bengal with Karatoya as its western boundary, Kamarupa, as noted by Hiuen Tsang "was large enough to include portions of Bihar, great portions of Bengal including the Bengal delta and almost the whole of modern Assam" The Chinese regarded Bhaskara, ruler of Kamarupa, as the "King of Eastern India"

Rajmohan Nath, in his *"The Background of Assamese Culture"* (1949), noted that the first race of people, with a more or less organised form of society, to inhabit the province, now known as Assam "were the Austro-Asiatics or the Austries, as the anthropologist claims them". This race, according to him, was called "THIS" and came from the northern region of Sumatra. He identified that race as the ancestors of the Khasis and Syntengs (Jaintias), who now live mainly in the Khasi-Jaintia sector of Meghalaya.

This account was confirmed by Gopinath Bordoloi, Assam's first Chief-Minister after Independence, while speaking at a Rotary Club dinner in New Delhi in 1949. "The anthropologists say that many thousands of years ago this land, as some other parts of India, was inhabited by Austrie races. The traces of this fact, they say, are to be found in the Khasi language as also in the monoliths found in the Khasi hills". Bordoloi also said that Mongolians migrated into the archaic Assam through the eastern gate, the last to have come being the Ahoms.

"Prehistoric archaeology and other evidence", says Dr. P. C. Choudhury, historian, "prove that the land, lying in one of the migration routes of mankind, received waves after waves of immigrants and perhaps sent out emigrants from prehistoric times onwards. Negrito, Austrie, Indonesian, Alpine-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman and other elements equally contributed to the population".

According to Dr. Choudhury, Brahmanical culture made good progress in ancient Assam and the Brahmanas held a position of honour in the royal court. However, it was not that they were only entrusted with the duty of the diffusion of learning, but many of them were also engaged in other professions. In spite of their pride in social superiority, they were liberal in their outlook regarding occupations and in their observance of other social laws. In the Nidhanpur Grant of Bhaskara Barman (644 AD), Dr. Choudhury noted, there were some interesting surnames such as Dutta, Ghosh, Kar, Kund, Mitra, Dev, Bhatta, Sen, Nagar, Nandi, Som, etc., "not probably found elsewhere in India except Assam and

Bengal" (Nidhanpur, incidentally, is a village in Sylhet district, which is now in Bangladesh but was a part of Assam before Independence and, of course, a part of Kamarupa earlier.) Much later, Ahom kings also brought many Brahmans and non-Brahmans from Bengal.

Apart from the Mongolians, some elements of Dravidians and Alpine Aryans (Hindus), Muslims also had been coming to settle in Assam at least since the 17th century. R. M. Nath noted that when the Koch kingdom was split after the death of Naranarayana, it was occupied by the Mohammedan ruler of Bengal for some time. Mohammedan officials were stationed in different parts of the country and Muslim immigrants were encouraged to settle in Goalpara, Hajo, Gauhati, etc. The Moghuls attacked Assam as many as eighteen times, though never with success. But while retreating, they also left behind many soldiers captured, who eventually made Assam their home. Several Muslim architects were brought from Bengal by Ahom kings to construct palaces and other royal installations.

And, as noted by Bordoloi,* "according to historians, it is also true that this part of the land was influenced from very early times by the Dravidian civilisation with its highly developed culture"

INTEGRATION AND ASSIMILATION

Thus, Assam or *Asom* (the name given to their kingdom by the Ahom kings) became a meeting place of Dravida, Mongoloid and Aryan stocks, mostly the latter two. "But the influence that was exerted by the recent Aryans and the Aryan civilisation was the greatest", said Bordoloi.

He said, "It seems clear that almost from the earliest times, streams of Aryan people reached the farthest corners of Assam through the route which ran by the foot of the Himalayas. From the earliest times till the 13th century, we find that the court language of almost all the kings was Sanskrit just as in any other part of India, although the spoken language was Magadhan". The *'Buranjis'* (history) of the Ahom kings

* Lakapriya Gopinath Bordoloi, the first premier and the first chief Minister of Assam.

were written in Assamese after the Ahom adopted Hinduism ; earlier, these used to be written in Tai language.

It, indeed, redounds to the common intrinsic traits of tolerance, amiability and hospitality of so many racial and cultural sects living in Assam that there grew up a peculiar blended culture and civilisation in the region, particularly in the spheres of art and craft, dance and music. This blending is noticeable more strikingly in the plains of the region than in the hills, where the Khasis, the Mizos, the Nagas and the Arunachal tribes by and large retained their separate racial, linguistic and cultural entities (obviously because of their living in generally intractable high hills) while maintaining their regional affinities that had been developed during their long co-residence with others in the plains earlier.

However, R. M. Nath noted that the Bihu festival of the plains, for instance, had a sequence with the *Nongkrem* dance of the Khasis, both of which again are connected with some religious observances of the Hindus like *Ambubachi*, *Ashokastami*, etc. According to him, the *Bihu* festival, the biggest local festival of the Assamese people and claimed to be a heritage of the Vedic age, was originally not a festival of the non-tribals, who migrated to Assam in later periods, but of the non-Aryan tribals. This fusion was possible obviously because of the fact that even the hill tribals of the region had earlier lived in the plains for a considerable period of time. At any rate, the fact remains that besides the plains tribals, there are also large numbers of Garos, Mikirs (Karbi), Miris and Lalungs and kinsmen of other hill tribals, who are still living at the foothills and serve as a link between the hills and the plains.

Late Jairamdas Doulatram noted that Assam, where Mongolians and Aryans, the Kirats and Ahoms, the Kalitas, Koches, Matakis and Chutiyas met during days gone by, "today speaks through an orchestra of varied tunes. She speaks with rare elegance and rhythm through her limitless forms of dance and music, which vibrate and echo in every hill and valley, uplifting each tribe and community to an ecstasy of emotion"

CATHOLICITY

Much of it was, however, due to the creed of catholicity preached by Sankardev, Assam's Vaishnavite reformer of the 15th century. During the mediaeval days, Hindu orthodoxy dominated the religious beliefs of the *Asamiyas*. But the preachings of Sankardev and his close disciples ushered in an era of renaissance. The spirit of love, amity and brotherhood propounded by them induced hundreds of non-tribals and tribals alike to veer round Vaishnavism. It was for their preachings and practices that the evils of untouchability, still acute in some other parts of India, could almost completely be eradicated from Assam.

And Sankardev's contribution in the realm of Assamese literature was no less significant. He composed songs, music and drama on religious themes and even participated in their performances. These still retain their oriental character in such purity that, not very long ago, Asha Devi of Wardah remarked that "in the *Satras* (Vaishnavite monasteries) of Assam, the pure tradition of Indian religious music and dancing are still preserved". In his literature, Sankardev did not use Sanskrit but the Assamese languages as the medium, it being the common language of the land.

The Assamese language played a big role in integrating and assimilating the different sects of people in Assam. In becoming the common medium or *lingua franca* of the land, this language, originally Magadha-Prakrita and somewhat Sanskritised, adopted many tribal words (30 per cent according to one estimate). Dr. Choudhury, however, noted that the Assamese language also contained some common words of Iranian and Indo-European origin, which did not occur in Vedic Indian.

According to Dr. Choudhury, the tribals, whether or not Hinduised, made notable contributions to the various aspects of the composite Assamese culture in social systems like matrimonial laws, in economic life through introduction of cottage industries and in foundation of religious cults like Saktism and Tantricism, besides introducing harvesting

ceremonies like Bihu. Matrimonial relations, indeed, played their role in bringing different communities closer to one another. The Puranic age apart, there were many instances of Ahom kings having their wives from the hills and from among the plains tribals and of the Ahom girls being married to the tribals or other non-tribals. One can find that such instances are not rare even today.

"It is due to the admixture of these elements and the mutual influence of one upon the other" Dr. Choudhury says, "that the Assamese culture, though fundamentally allied to that of India, has retained its separate entity with local variations"

THE ASSAMESE MIND

Dr. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya

The Assamese today is not at peace with himself. He sees his material world crumbling before his very eyes. His precious possession, land, has become scarce. His educated son or daughter is facing unemployment. He has no capital or incentives to start industries or business. All openings seem closed to him in the competitive capitalist and centralised economy. He lost his independence in 1826. He fought for freedom along with his brethren in the rest of the country in the hope of getting a state of his own. He got one in 1947. But today he feels that whatever he got is an illusion. He is now in the danger of being dispossessed. He has rights only to give, and no right to preserve or manage his own precious possessions. He is frustrated and angry. He resents and complains. But his voice is lost in the din. His soul is about to die out of agony. In the comity of Indian nationalities, his nationality has no status except as an unequal and wronged partner. Others are more equal than it. As a wretched member of the club he feels that he is being humiliated. The Assamese feels that his fight for the basic right is being jeopardised in the name of an abstract and remote idea of national integration. The communal ratio or the pattern of the population of his small state is being silently altered in such a manner that within another decade his majority status will be reduced to a minority status. This agony of mind is rarely understood by a Bihari in Bihar, a Bengali in Bengal or a Tamilian in Tamilnadu.

ONE INDIAN UNDERSTOOD HIM

There was only one Indian who understood the fear and agony of this small nationality living in perpetual fear of losing its identity. He was Mahatma Gandhi.

It was in 1944 at Sevagram that an emissary of the late Sri Gopinath Bardoloi, Sri Mahendra Mohan Chaudhury, ex-governor of Punjab, met the Mahatma and talked with him on the Assam situation. The Muslim League ministry in the state then pursued a policy of encouraging immigration of peasants from East Bengal (then a part of British India) on a large scale. Mr. Jinnah decided about this time that Assam should also be included in Pakistan. Sri Bardoloi mentioned this problem in the memorandum submitted to Gandhiji through his emissary. Gandhiji's answer was ready. He said that if unbridled immigration to a small province like Assam went on and if as a result the province felt that its inhabitants were likely to be reduced to minority, then it had the right to *satyagraha*. However, he cautioned that the issue should not be given a communal colour. The province could take appropriate measures against such an evil.

Gandhiji did not stop there. When the negotiations with the Cabinet Mission were going on in Delhi, Assam's fate hanged in the balance. At this psychological hour, Gandhiji advised the Assamese to rebel even against the Congress to save its identity. Assam finally decided not to sit in the section along with Bengal to frame its constitution. "My mind is made up", Gandhiji said, "Assam must not lose its soul. It must uphold it against the whole world. Else, I will say that Assam had only manikins and no men. It is an impertinent suggestion that Bengal should dominate Assam in any way. Tell the people that even if Gandhi tries to dissuade us, we won't listen." His words acted like magic. The Assamese rose to a man to give Bardoloi the support he needed.

Since then Gandhiji's words have become Bible to the Assamese. There was something in this great man which inspired the lowly and the little communities. He was the main architect of national unity in India, and it was at his call

that the Assamese joined the freedom movement in 1920, after the resolution on linguistic states had been adopted by the Indian National Congress. In the movements of 1921, 1930, 1932 and 1942, Assam played a glorious role. Till today, Indian history virtually means the history of the North, the South and the East. The North-East, is still considered to be barbarian,—a land that has to be civilised.

But what is this civilisation, asks the North-Eastern? In terms of economy, it is still colonisation. The big capitalists and the big business dominate the economy and the young Assamese or Naga entrepreneur feels that the doors to his progress are barred. "Do you have a *krorepati*?" Dr. Lohia once asked me. "I said 'no'. He smiled and said that then your society did not possess even a capitalist worth the name, that was in a way good, he said. That man loved this region and felt that it was an ideal place for experimentation of his ideas of a four pillar state, and small unit technology. The small is beautiful. It lives in the village, the smallest unit of a small community.

Till yesterday, Assam had its village society intact. The Assamese society had a loose caste structure and the Assamese Hindu and the Assamese Muslim lived in peace. The relationship with the tribals was also cordial. The difference between the high and the low was negligible. The great neo-Vaishnavite saint Sankardeva left a deep imprint on the mind of the Assamese. He gave him the message of spiritual equality and for the last four centuries, the message has remained a source of solace and inspiration. He gave the Assamese a sense of community, besides initiating him into high spirituality and Indianness. Religion has been a unifying force in Assamese society. But the society has changed greatly during the British rule. Religion no longer seemed to be a unifying force. The communities however continued to live as neighbours. Badshah Khan, when he visited Assam some years ago, was surprised to find that Assam was free from communal riots or disharmony.

ASSAMESE NATIONALITY

The Assamese nationality is a heterogeneous community which includes the tribal groups like the Ravas, the Bodos, the Tiwas, the Mishings, the Karbis and the Dimasas. Compared to these members of this composite nationality, the Bengalis and others are newcomers to the land. A large number of Nepalis from Nepal also came here in the last few decades. This flow of people has given to the state its peculiar demographic character giving rise to frequent tensions. During 1950-79, the immigration from other parts of the country also took place. But this influx is normal. It does not create any tension. What creates tension is the unbridled flow of a large number of a single linguistic group or a religion.

Unfortunately a large number of foreigners have been detected among these groups. Various estimates have been made about their number, and it is not easy to arrive at the correct figure. The official estimate puts it at more than three lakhs while the unofficial estimate, at about 13 lakhs.

Faced with such a situation, the Assamese mind is once again in a ferment. The man who impressed them most after Sankardeva was Mahatma Gandhi. His dream of a non-exploitative and multinational country inspired the Assamese, but that dream seems betrayed. The Union of India, which the Assamese joined voluntarily, was to him an embodiment of certain values and ideals. He finds that the newcomers insist simply on their constitutional rights, and not on their duties.

Gandhiji defined Indian citizenship in his own inimitable way thus, Whether the Bengalis in Bihar, though a minority, would have recognition? This is a ticklish question. In my opinion, an Indian is a citizen of India, enjoying equal rights in Bihar as a Bihari. He must never be guilty of exploiting the Biharis or behaving as a stranger in Bihar. If I bring my Gujarati manners to Bengal and impose myself on the province I would expect the Bengalis to expel me. I cannot then claim the rights of the Indian as against the Bengalis. (August 29, 1947). To the Assamese mind, this is the finest definition of Indian citizenship. But when the definition does not find wide

acceptance, his mind rebels and thinks of double citizenship, the domicile rules, new Constitution where his basic right to self-determination would be honoured and protected without being overridden by the minority rights. He fondly remembers the statements of late Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru who conceded the Assamese claim to have Assamese as the state language.

Behind all this, lies the mind that is continuously engaged in search of his roots. He is disappointed with his own politicians. He is dissatisfied with his own artists and litterateurs when they fail to find the remote vision in the immediate word or canvas. He wants to create history by denying the ugly reality which irritates and pains him. A search for his self starts. It is a lonely voyage along the uncharted path of a different destiny, different from the one he chose in 1920 or 1947.

The Assamese is still a becoming man. The perfect community and the perfect system still seem distant. Therefore he wants to remove his shackles at least mentally and spiritually, some times in poetic or literary effort, sometimes in songs, sometimes in mere writings to inform or to educate, and sometimes in public speaking or *satyagraha*. He is in a self-defensive mood. Being a becoming man, he often, at his weaker moments, submits to temptations of violence in speech or behaviour. When he fails to act in freedom, he behaves irrationally too. The capitalist or the communist civilisation failed to spiritualise a whole community and give him back his innocent moral sense. But he never gives up his sense of belonging to the community, because he feels that it is through the community that he would reach his ideal of perfect life.

RICH MIND

A large part of Assamese thinking, writing and journalism is devoted to discovery of his collective self. The poverty of the body is sought to be compensated by enrichment of the mind. Still the spirit is not satisfied. The goal of 'Golden Assam' within a regenerated India, and a new world seems

distant despite the books, poetry, songs dramatic performances and platform lectures. They appear to him to be mere necessities to be put in the knapsack on the weary back of the traveller walking along the road to his destined goal.

The dream often appears unattainable, even shattered. If the dream is shattered, what remains of the spirit? He becomes angry and searches for an alternative. The idea of an Indian federation consisting of autonomous states seems dead. His isolation, poverty and spiritual frustration now move him to seek fulfilment in radicalism. But what is the radical alternative?

His mind hovers around the proletariat and the party socialism or communism. But they cannot satisfy his quest. His mind moves towards original Gandhism, to Lohiaism, to Maoism, to total revolution and to utopias of all sorts.

MOOD OF DESPAIR

Sometimes it expresses a mood of alienation, and in despair takes to meditation. It seeks a radical god, the deliverer. Did not Sankardeva, the founder of Assamese Vaishnavism, say 'take respose in *Hari*'? But the tortured mind does not find peace; it then seeks another source of inspiration in the Assamese modern thinkers. Did not Laxminath Bezbourah say that the key to the gate of the temple of welfare and progress lay there, in the mother tongue?

The language evokes in him the noblest sentiments. Language is a sweet deity; But his body instantly reminds him that the sweet deity cannot be worshipped iwth empty stomach and by a servile mind. The idea of the community still haunts him. Is it a lost idea? 'Nothing is lost', the little voice within his soul tells him. Move on, the newly acquired radical conscience tells him, move on till you reach your goal. The proletariat has no time for you, it is busy with its economic aims; the party has no time for you, it is concerned with its political aims. The dead rebels beckon you from their graves. They tell him to mind the goal, not the eternal city of the

proletariat state, but the 'values'. The path is convertible with the values. The rebellion is eternal.

The dream returns, but fully only to the few who move with the cycle of agonising experience in time. The reality without the enlivening dream is what the national mass media reports, but usually with a slant.

It is not the whole reality, but those aspects of reality which shock, sensationalise or serve an interest are reported. The floods, changes of government, border clashes, language riots, Assamese non-Assamese tensions, war, *satyagrahas*, and key political figures are some of the items which invariably catch headlines. Gradually the Assamese rises from the stupor and realises the truth. It is a bitter but hard truth. Like the national politicians, the national press cannot gauge his feelings or his facts correctly. If not the Leviathan state, it is his own way of living and thinking that makes him either a cynic or a sceptic or a stoic. The lot that comes to report Assam return without actually seeing Assam or really confronting the agonised Assamese mind. These reporters once unknowingly equated the Assamese with the Nagas, and now after decades of reporting Assam, they see only the scenes of their choice. The readers are, therefore, rightly deluded with the impression that all Assamese are either headhunters or typical characters in the crime fiction.

The Assamese have learnt to bear with such slants in reporting, the abusive verbiage and instances of violation of the national mantra '*Satyameva Jayate*'. He, however, knows that the politicians and the journalists are not India. India lives in her dead and future heroes, in her eternal messages like "*ekam sad vipra bahuda vadanti*", in the suppressed voice of her dumb millions whose voices are heard only once in a decade, in the community of the wise of all nationalities and the agonised mind of the slaves. The little community waits now without hope, for a great man like the Mahatma comes only after an interval of centuries. Behind his love of the soil and the language, lurks the desire of rebellion, the rebellion which never gives false hope of promise.

History shows that the Assamese mind has gone through

the same phases of sweet and bitter experiences as other nationalities have gone through. Yet it is not the sole factor shaping the mind. Nature is also active. The Assam Himalayas, which Lohia termed as one of the most beautiful hills of mankind and the valley of the Male River have also shaped the Assamese mind. This mind is sufficiently assimilative and patient. It is fired by a will to live amidst conflicts and situations of death. The community mind best expresses itself in the values of everyday life. The ardent passion for a linguistic state does not necessarily make the Assamese a conservative. He rejoices in talking to the Behari *rickshawalla* in indifferent Hindi and talking to a Bengali friend in his own language. He reads Bengali books, has a deep interest in the tribal life and usually is very liberal in social commerce. Inter-community and inter-caste marriages are tolerated. The woman enjoys a fair degree of freedom. Freedom in the Assamese mind never seemed complete without equality. The Assamese also has deep love for his folk arts. Freedom should be integrated with beauty in the day-to-day life.

THE SEARCH IS ON

The search for the community often restricts the growth of the mind towards infinity. Expansion of the outer circle compels the mind to express itself in those activities and pursuits which have common values for the majority of men. But the individual has another inner dimension of growth. Here the intellectuals and the artists come in. The growth of a modern intelligentsia and a modern literature show that at one pole of the community, the creative mind is active too. Between the individual and social poles of consciousness, the Assamese mind oscillates like a pendulum. The search for a community is never dead even in the mind of the topmost writer in the land.

A REGION OF NEGLECTED POTENTIALITIES AND UNREALIZED OPPORTUNITIES

Sri Parameswar Sarma

The above description is borrowed from the report on the economic conditions of the South submitted to President Roosevelt by the US National Emergency Council in 1938. It is a tribute to the political sagacity of Mr. Roosevelt that one of his first acts as President was to order an enquiry into the causes of backwardness of the US South. He took ready note of the mounting discontent in the South over its quasi-colonial economy that found rebellious expression in the book: *'Divided We Stand'*, written by the Texas historian Walter Prescott Webb. Webb mercilessly struck out at what he described as the 'economic imperial control of the North'.

'The paradox of the South', the report observed, 'is that while blessed with immense wealth, its people as a whole are the poorest in the country. Lacking industries of its own, the south has been forced to trade the richness of its soil, its minerals and forests and the labour of its people for goods manufactured elsewhere. In the above excerpt if the northeastern region of India is substituted for the US South, one can have a fairly accurate picture of this strategic frontier region.

Like the US South in the thirties, the north-eastern region of India too has a quasi-colonial economy, a legacy of foreign rule. The economic disparities of the region with the rest of the national economy have widened over the long decades of

planning—a striking example of the operation of Myrdal's 'backwash effects' of economic development.

A RESOURCE-RICH REGION

The north-eastern region has a rich and diversified resource base. The hydel potential of this region is a third of the country's total. Ironically the region occupies a bottom position in both per capita production and consumption of electricity and consumers in the region pay the highest power tariff in the country. Against the present average all India per capita consumption of power of 110 KWH, the per capita consumption in this region is only 25 KWH. It has been estimated that from its hydel sources alone the region can generate 13 million KW of power which while fully meeting its own needs will leave substantial surplus for the northern states.

The extent of the present shortfall can be gauged from the fact that in Assam which consumes the bulk of the regional power output, against a peak demand of 395 MW, the total peak availability is only 100 MW. The extreme lag in power production is reflected in the tardy progress of rural electrification. So far only 7 per cent of the villages of the region have been electrified against cent per cent electrification in Punjab and Haryana. Power is a critical input for both agricultural and industrial development. Power shortage has come seriously in the way of the region's modest industrial effort and impeded extension of lift irrigation, urgently needed to raise and stabilise the farm output in the context of increased incidence and intensity of flood and drought.

Water is another basic resource in which this region is richly endowed. The Northeast has the highest rainfall in the world. The Irrigation Commission (1972) estimated the utilisable flow of the Brahmaputra at 12,300 m.c.m. The specific yield of the Brahmaputra is 3.50 CFS per sq. mile which is believed by experts to be the highest in the world. The huge water resources potential of the Brahmaputra offers vast scope for irrigation and hydro-power development.

According to one estimate the total hydel potential of the Brahmaputra is 12,900 MW. At present only one per cent of this potential has been developed and another 2 percent is in the process of exploitation leaving 97 percent untapped. Dr. K.L. Rao indicated the possibility of developing a huge power potential of the Brahmaputra at the point it drops from the Tibetan plateau into the Indian plains. The fantastic possibility offered is that of a potential of 30m. KW.

The north-eastern region contains almost a seventh of the country's total area under forest, but accounts for only 5 percent of its annual production of wood. Forests have intimate links with the tribal economy of the region and offers considerable avenues for employment generation. Like water, forests are a renewable resource, but a variety of factors, not least large scale encroachment by immigrants and the practice of opening up of the reserves for settlement at the time of election have led to a steady decline of the region's forest wealth.

Apart from other adverse economic effects, the rapid denudation of the forest cover has produced a perceptible measure of ecological imbalance manifest in the region's greater vulnerability to flood and drought. A dynamic programme of production oriented forestry, which will call for massive Central assistance, can give a big boost to the development of the regional economy, open up new fields of employment and result in considerable gains in revenue. The present low revenue yield from the forest sector is directly the result of low investment.

Because of the absence of extensive exploratory work and geological mapping, present knowledge of the mineral deposits in the region is far from complete. Even what has been mapped up presents an adequate resource base for several industries using minerals in addition to those that exist at present. With the recent discovery of natural gas in Tripura in large quantities, this region has re-established its position as the principal on-shore source of petroleum and natural gas in the country. The crude oil and natural gas reserves of Assam are estimated at 70.46 million tonnes and 23,000 million cubic

metres respectively. Tripura has an estimated reserve of natural gas of 25,000 million cubic metres. The considerably increased output of natural gas which will pick up further with increased production of crude, has created an ample base for expanded production of fertiliser and petrochemicals as well as for extended power generation. This precious resource has at present to be flared because of the failure to utilise the surplus natural gas.

COLONIAL PATTERN OF EXPLOITATION

Oil is a non-renewable and wasting asset. Even the oil-rich Middle East countries have recognized and acted on the need to build up other forms of capital assets to provide alternative sources of income in the foreseeable future when the oil wells will go dry. In marked contrast, the exploitation of its petroleum resource, which is the only mineral that this region has in considerable quantity, has throughout been on a colonial pattern. Developed as an enclave activity in the British period, the oil industry of the region has slender links with the rest of the regional economy. The foreign investors appropriated the entire profit income of the industry. Even of the wage and revenue income all but a small part leaked out of the region. The impact of the industry on the regional economy and its contribution to the growth of regional savings and capital formation had been negligible.

The post-independence era has witnessed major developments in the exploration and exploitation of the oil resources of the region. With the successive oil finds in Upper Assam, striking of oil in Arunachal and discovery of a vast reservoir of natural gas in Tripura, the oil horizons in the region are continually widening. Apart from harnessing of natural gas for production of power and fertiliser, this region has now two refineries in the public sector in addition to the private sector refinery at Digboi, representing foreign investment, which heralded the oil era in the region at the end of the last century. The region has now two petro-chemical complexes, one in the

State sector at Namrup and the other coming up as adjunct to the public sector refinery at Bongaigaon.

On the face of it these developments are not unimpressive. But because of the scale in which they have been planned and the manner they have been organised, their impact on the regional economy, particularly in terms of employment generation and revenue yield, is disappointingly small. The bulk of the crude output of the Assam oil fields go to feed the Barauni refinery the capacity of which exceeds the capacity of the three refineries of Assam put together. The Employment Review Committee of the Assam Assembly in its report (June, 1978) on the employment pattern in the Bongaigaon Refinery-cum-Petro-Chemicals Complex noted certain disheartening findings: The representation of local people in the senior executive positions is palpably poor. Even the graduate engineers of the region, who in the tight employment situation in the country cannot expect to find outlets outside the region, are poorly represented in the cadre of Graduate Engineer Trainees (15 out of 60). Local people account for only 8 percent of the Class II jobs. Of the 199 security personnel 104 were recruited through the regional office in Calcutta. A major allegation noted in the report is that the families which had been uprooted for location of the project were not provided with land elsewhere for their rehabilitation nor their children provided with regular jobs in the BRPL.

It is the unhappy experience of the people of this region that they have always to agitate for the satisfaction of their legitimate aspirations, which in a democratic set-up, more so in the era of planning, should find fulfilment in the normal course. The two public sector refineries are no exceptions in this regard. Each needed a massive popular agitation to wrest it from the unwilling hands of the Centre overcoming powerful opposition from vested interests and hostile propaganda by a section of the national Press. All manner of pleas were advanced against Assam's case; insufficiency of crude output, superiority of Barauni as a refinery site and uneconomic nature of transport by product pipeline. The testimony of experts and actual figures on the availability of crude thoroughly

exposed the hollowness of these pleas. The international experts unequivocally supported Assam's case and gave opinion in favour of a product pipeline. The then Union Petroleum Minister's objections to this mode of transport however soon turned out to be hypocritical. For within a month of his statement on the issue, he declared in Parliament that the Barauni refinery would be linked to both Delhi and Calcutta. Even the surplus products of the Gauhati refinery are now transported to Siliguri by product pipeline.

Noteworthy in this connection is the damning observation on the location of the refinery in Barauni contained in the 36th Report of the Lok Sabha Committee on Public Undertakings. 'The Committee', the report stated, 'feels that in retrospect it was an entirely wrong decision to have located the refinery at its present site (Barauni); a decision taken in spite of the strong objections on technical grounds both from the Indian and Russian experts. That facts proved experts to be right and decision makers wrong is too obvious'. The report also gave the following figures on comparative costs of refining in Gauhati, Barauni and Gujrat refineries. The per ton cost of refining in the three refineries are Rs. 21.00, Rs. 37.93 and Rs. 37.48 respectively.

Assam crude has a high percentage (80%) of aromatic content. A Naptha Cracking plant, instead of a Naptha Reformer unit included in the Bongaigaon Petro-Chemical Complex, would have made for wider impact through development of a large number of ancillary industries considerably extending the employment potential of the project. As it is now planned, Assam has not only been deprived of the Naptha Cracker unit but the Naptha produced in the Complex will also be sent outside the State considerably limiting the scope for ancillary development from the establishment of the Complex.

Besides petroleum, mineral production in other areas has negligible impact on the regional economy. The regional mineral production amounts to only 7.5 percent of the value of the national output in the sector. The present production of coal in the region is 0.6 million tonnes against a demand of

about 2.5 million tonnes. The total cement production in the region is 5 lakh tonnes against an annual regional requirement of 13 lakh tonnes. Coal has become the major fuel resource of the world today. In spite of its high heating values, utilisation potential of north-eastern coal has remained low because of its high sulphur content and fragmentary nature. Once technological means are devised to overcome these drawbacks, the way will be opened for its large scale utilisation. Coal-derived combustion gases offer the possibility of use in power generation that at present has not received the attention it deserves.

Overall, the resource utilisation position in this region is very much below the national average. Barring the soil and forest resources, the problem in respect of the other resources is one of gross under-utilisation. This has resulted in low per capita income which is much below the national average, low urbanisation and other manifestations of poverty and backwardness.

TRANSPORT BOTTLENECK

A major hurdle to exploitation of the abundant natural resources of the region is the transport and communicational bottleneck. The railway network of the region is at once outmoded and inadequate. This region which represents 8 percent of the area of the country has 3.2 percent of the country's total track kilometerage. Outside Assam, the six other states of the region have together only 21.70 km of rail road. Of the 2215.57 km of rail road in the region only 4.74 p.c. is broad gauge. In its 723 km course through Assam, the Brahmaputra is at present spanned by a single bridge. The opening up of the hills to modern means of transport and the development and strengthening of the arterial routes through Assam, the heartland and gateway of the region, and the conversion of the entire length of the trunk railway system of the region from meter to broad gauge will break its geographical isolation and facilitate fuller exploitation of its rich and varied resource potential.

The road network of the region shows similar deficiencies. The north-eastern region has 23.6 km of roads per 100 sq. km. against the national average of 34.4 km. This low figure conceals considerable inter-state disparities. Arunachal and Mizoram have only 5.6 km and 6.8 km of roads per 100 sq. km. Even in Assam only 24 percent of the villages are connected by all-weather roads.

Development literature abounds in examples of the impact of transport development on economic growth. A major programme of road building in Turkey undertaken for military purposes gave a tremendous spur to the economic development of the country. A massive transport development programme for the north-eastern region to provide it a modern efficient communication and transport system through development of inter-state roads, railways, ropeways, waterways etc. will, apart from creating much-needed infra-structure, release powerful growth impulses if the programme is avowedly oriented to the use of local manpower and resources. Transport and communication, in short, is another major area in which the problem of backwardness of the region can be attacked.

SUB-SUBSISTENCE AGRICULTURE

The population of the north-eastern region are predominantly rural (90.57 percent). The great majority of the rural population are small and marginal farmers and landless agriculturists. In Assam where 70 percent of the cultivable area of the region is located, the average size of ownership holding is 3.10 acres which is one of the lowest in the country. It compares unfavourably with 8.83 acres in Maharashtra and 5.37 acres in Punjab, and is significantly lower than the national average. Majority of the small and marginal farmers are engaged in mono-cultural farming—mainly rice. Living standards are low and 75 percent of the people are living below the poverty line. Occupational and social mobility is negligible due to economic and socio-cultural frictions. This is especially true of the hills where low productivity shifting cultivation is the rule.

INDUSTRIAL LAG.

In spite of a rich and diversified resource base, this region is dismally backward in industrialisation. There are only 12 medium and large scale units in the entire region. 9 large scale units are in the process of being set up. In the small industries sector there are 2,653 units employing 27,000 people and investment in fixed assets amounting to Rs. 1,415,00 lakhs.

A measure of the extremely low development of the regional economy is to be found in the fact that 23 percent of the per capita income in the region is spent on manufactured consumer goods brought from outside. If account is taken of the imports of non-manufactured foodgrains items, the dependence of the consumer in the region on supplies from outside will be found to be considerably greater.

A techno-economic survey of goods imported to the region conducted by the North-Eastern Industrial and Technical Consultancy Organisation (1976) indentified 28 imported consumer goods which can be taken up for manufacture locally without market constraint. A major bottleneck to be overcome is dearth of local entrepreneurial and managerial talent. The approach suggested to overcome the hurdle is a training and technical assistance programme linked with integrated package scheme. Promotion of local entrepreneurship in a backward region has been recognized as an essential element of a strategy of correcting regional imbalance. Active association of the local population in the industrial process is also a desideratum for creating a congenial industrial climate.

The hill areas of the region are rich in fodder resources which can support a large livestock population. There is considerable scope for upgrading the livestock and, in the process, for generating entrepreneurial activity in dairy, leather and a number of other associated industries. The region has extensive scope for development of horticulture and canning industry on a big scale.

ASSAM—HEARTLAND AND GATEWAY

Assam which is at once the heartland and gateway of the north-eastern region covers an area of 78,523 sq. km., a fifth of which comprises the two hills districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. In spite of being the seat of oil and tea and of much of the industrial activity in the region, Assam has a predominantly rural and agrarian economy. 91.1 percent of the population of the State are rural—a figure considerably higher than the national average of 80.1 percent. This large rural population is overwhelmingly dependent upon agriculture. Tea cultivation excluded, three-quarters of the labour force are employed in agriculture and allied pursuits. Agriculture accounts for 56 percent of the State Income against the national average of 45 percent.

DEFICIT FOOD PRODUCTION

In spite of its agrarian economy, Assam's food budget is precariously poised. In the production of cereals, the position varies from a marginal surplus to a marginal deficit, while in the production of pulses, sugar and edible oils, this State runs a chronic and heavy deficit. In respect of commodities of agricultural origin, two important commodities in which this State enjoys a surplus position are tea and jute. Lack of diversification and instability of agriculture constitute the basic weakness of the State's economy. The near stagnation in the farm output has become a matter of much concern in the context of a rapidly rising population and growing vulnerability to flood and drought. The flood problem, perennial plague, is yet to be attacked. In spite of repeated promises by the Centre, the Brahmaputra Flood Control Commission is not yet taken over by the Union Government.

Contrary to a common misconception in planning circles, Assam contains quite a good number of rain shadow areas. Besides, rainfall distribution is not uniform over time and space. Recurring spells of drought in recent years created near famine conditions in sizable areas of the State. To

extend the area under Rabi to offset the loss of standing crops during the flood season and to promote multiple cropping, a precondition is rapid extension and modernisation of irrigation facilities. Notwithstanding the high water potential of the State not a single major irrigation project has been commissioned so far. Out of a net cropped area of 2,371 m. hectares only 0.3 m. hectares are claimed to be brought under irrigation. This is all the achievement made in a span of thirty years. This State badly needs an irrigation research institute organised on autonomous footing to conduct special research on the problems of water resources development peculiar to this region.

INFLUX AND POPULATION EXPLOSION

By far the greatest problem facing the State at present is its explosive population growth. It has been the source of mounting socio-economic pressures. Over the past few decades the State has been experiencing an average decadal growth rate of population of 30 percent, mainly the result of influx of foreign nationals. In a single decade : 1961-71 the population of the State grew by 35 percent as against 25 percent for the country as a whole. The Registrar General of India, on the basis of a sample registration over the period : 1974-76 estimated the rate of natural increase of population in Assam at 1.6 percent per annum against 2.0 percent for the country as a whole. The figures clearly establish that the 3.5 percent annual growth rate of population in Assam since 1961 is largely the result of influx of foreign nationals. Migration has historically been an important component of population growth in Assam. There has however been a considerable intensification of the process in the last two decades which has threatened a major shift in the demographic structure, apart from creating serious socio-economic pressures.

The heavy influx of foreign nationals has considerably aggravated the already mounting pressure of population on land in this State. A measure of the increase in this respect will be found in the rate of increase in the density of

population per unit area under food crop. Between 1961 and 1971, the respective rates of increase for Assam and all-India were 34 percent and 12 percent. Incidentally, 74 percent of the total cropped area in Assam is used for production of food crops. Also to be noted, the percentage of households owing no land in Assam, as revealed by the 17th round of the National Sample Survey, is not only much higher than the national average, but is the highest among the states. The average size of the agricultural operational holding in Assam is also very low and it has been steadily declining over the years. More than half of the agricultural holdings in Assam have areas of less than one hectare.

Above are offered only a few of the available indicators of the mounting pressure of population on land in Assam, largely the result of heavy influx of foreign nationals. With the scope for extensive agriculture exhausted, reliance for increasing the farm output will henceforth have to be placed on intensive agriculture. The growing impoverishment of the rural population has however severely limited this possibility. Continuous and heavy influx of migrants into this border State has thus done pievous damage to its agrarian economy, not to speak of the socio-cultural, political and other problems created by the process.

INDUSTRIALISATION—FALSE HOPES

Outside oil, tea and coal were until comparatively recently the two other major industries in Assam. Of these, tea continues to be the largest employer accounting for 61 percent of the factory employment in 1976. But the employment opportunities in this traditional industry have long crossed their peak. Like oil, tea industry had also its origin in the early British period, and like the former was started as enclave activity with poor linkages with the regional economy. Two important offshots of the industry, the Gauhati tea auction market and the plywood industry of the state are a recent growth.

The plywood industry which now comprises 40 mills is

the fastest growing forest industry in the State. But as a recent probe by the Employment Review Committee of the Assam Assembly revealed, this important forest-based industry which has been receiving liberal assistance from the State Government and various financial institutions is also operating in the familiar colonial pattern. The head offices of 14 mills which account for bulk of the output are located outside the State. 80 per cent of the total production of the plywood mills is transferred to depots in other States depriving the State in consequence of its legitimate share of the revenue yield, employment and other benefits.

The revenue accruing to the State Government from this major forest industry is a meagre Rs. 35 lakhs by way of sales tax against Rs. 6 crores accruing to the Central Government. As regards employment in the plywood industry, the committee's findings are revealing: 76 per cent of the positions in the managerial and senior staff have been filled with recruits from outside the State. 90 per cent of the jobs are filled without advertisement. Noteworthy also is the adverse impact on the forest landscape caused by large scale illegal felling of trees to feed the industry. All together, like the few other industries set up in this State during the plan period, the plywood industry has turned out to be a blind alley so far as the aim of industrialisation was to enlarge job opportunities for the local unemployed and enrich the State exchequer.

As noted in the report of the IDBI team of experts, this State suffers from a net outflow of income by way of inter-state trade deficit, mostly the result of 'personal and investment income remittances'. 'The inflows of private investment' had been small. Head offices of majority of the bigger industrial and commercial enterprises in this State, even of some of those whose activities are entirely confined to this region, are located outside its geographical area. The credit-deposit ratio of public sector banks is also heavily slanted against the State. Establishment of an adequate institutional base for handling foreign exchange clearance, export-import and customs facilities etc. at Gauhati is an essential step for the growth of industry and trade in the region.

The cumulative impact of the various factors briefly indicated above is to be found in the low and trailing growth of per head income in this State. Relatively the most developed State in the north-eastern region, the per capita income of Assam (at current prices) in 1977-78 was Rs. 866 against Rs. 1163 for the country as a whole. Worse, in the matter of growth it is showing an increasing lag in relation to the national average. Between 1970-78, the per capita income of Assam rose by 2.6 per cent while that of the country as a whole rose by 8.6 per cent, both calculated on the basis of 1970-71 prices. This is a clear pointer that Assam which is the hub of the north-eastern region is increasingly falling behind the rest of the country in its economic growth. Because of the special features of its backwardness, the present treatment of this region as on a par with the backward regions of the industrially advanced states is destined to failure as shown by the results achieved so far.

ECONOMIC INTEGRATION THE ONLY ANSWER

Nothing short of a massive direct Central involvement in the building of the regional economy through large scale infrastructural development, establishment of large 'mother' industries, carefully chosen from a regard for their potential to spawn ancillary growth, an imaginative programme for development of local entrepreneurial talent among other measures of direct intervention can alone lift the regional economy out of the slough. To ensure that the benefits of development percolate both horizontally and vertically, the development efforts of the constituent states of the region should be carefully co-ordinated, and at the local level emphasis should be applied on integrated area development, making imaginative use of technologies suited to the local agro-ecological and socio-economic situations. The recipe for meaningful integration of this backward region at the national and regional level lies, in short, in economic integration.

ASSAM DESERVES GREATER ATTENTION

Srimati Pushpalata Das

The land that wakes up with the first touch of the morning sun—the eastern sentinel, the emerald coloured wonder land of India—is not at ease today. Cloudy fumes eclipse her golden glory, cares and agonies engulf her heart. Assam, the very name of which evokes in one's mind a whole range of values and ideals, heritage and traditions, and a civilisation that has developed and flourished on the banks of the red river since the beginning of human history, stands today at the cross roads of time. This playground of cultural diversities is enveloped in gloom, the atmosphere is heavy with wails of agonies, anxieties and apprehensions. Yes, her woes and fears lurk beneath her sweet sights, sounds and smells—woes that the rest of the world does not comprehend, fears that the rest of the country perhaps does not understand. And exactly there lies the most tragic part of her history.

CURRENT UNREST

The serene land has thrown up an agitation—an unprecedented mass-upsurge during recent months on the question of foreigner's influx into the state. But it is not a new problem nor has it developed all on a sudden. It started brewing in fact with the eclipse of her freedom in 1826 when the treaty of Yandaboo offered Assam on a platter to the British. The kings signed the treaty but the people revolted and refused to fall in line. The Britishers could not rely on

the locals and brought in recruits from Bengal, one of their earliest posts, to man their administration. Bengal being the threshold of the rest of the world for them, the Assamese normally called any foreigner a 'Bengali'. The Britishers were called the 'fair skinned Bengalis' (*Baga Bangal*). The Assamese had a natural suspicion about whoever came from the west. All the invading incursions into the state, save for the Burmese in 1820s, had been through Bengal. The Indians who were brought in by the British also represented for the Assamese the foreign regime and naturally could not be easily assimilated into the Assamese society.

Any way, the flood-gates for immigration were burst open and human swarms started sneaking in. The then provincial government led by the Muslim League further encouraged the process in the thirties and immigration of peasants from the adjoining districts of Bengal gradually engulfed vast areas. And it was against the backdrop of such a serious situation, that in his 1931 report the then Census Superintendent, Mr. C. S. Mullan said "In fact the way in which they have seized upon the vacant areas in the Assam valley seems almost uncanny. Without tamult, without fuss, without undue trouble to the district revenue staff, a population which must account to over half a million has transplanted itself from Bengal to the Assam Valley during the last twenty five years."

"Probably the most important event in the province during the last twenty five years, an event moreover, which seems likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than did the Burmese invaders of 1820, the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilisation, has been the invasion of a vast horde of land-hungry Bengali immigrants mostly Muslims from the districts of Eastern Bengal and in particular from Mymensing. The invasion began sometime before 1911 and the Census report of that year is the first report which makes mention of the advancing host. But as we know, the Bengali immigrants censused for the first time on the char lands of Goalpara in 1911 were merely the advanced guard or rather the scouts of a huge

army following closely at their heels. By 1921 the first army corpse had passed into Assam and had practically conquered the district of Goalpara.

"It is sad but by no means improbable, that in another thirty years, Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will find himself at home...."

Later, Sri S.P. Desai, the government's Special Officer in charge of Examining Government Reserves, summed up the gravity of the situation in his report thus. "The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation is, so far as the immigrant encroachers are concerned, virtually non-existent. The immigrants openly claim to have short circuited the local staff and officers. Every day new bamboo sheds and temporary huts are sprouting up in the reserves. I found that the immigrants absolutely ignored the local officers (from the Sub-Divisional Officer downwards) so much so that they did not even answer questions put to them. The Nepali graziers and Assamese *pamuas* finding no protection from any where give "*dohai*" in the name of the king Emperor. To this some of the thoughtless among the immigrants are said to have replied that the immigrants themselves are the kings—verily the cup of humiliation for the Assamese is full. They feel the law is meant for them only and not for the immigrants, that the Government which is the custodian and trustee of their interests has failed them. All sections of the local population are greatly perturbed and their talk exhibits deep-rooted bitterness.

"They come in numbers, raise sheds and later begin to cultivate. The few graziers in the neighbourhood are incapable of doing anything apart from protesting and appealing to the local officers. The immigrants do not listen to protests. The only alternative for the grazier is to shift himself bag and baggage. But where he is to go?"

Following the partition, Sri Desai is the Chief Secretary to the State Government urged the Central Government not to flush in refugees in massive scale to the state as it was already over-crowded. But Sri Desai's farsightedness was replied with a quick transfer order. His successor, nominated

by the centre, could not continue in Assam for long because of differences between him and the state Chief Minister.

SHOUTING HOARSE ALL THE WAY

In fact the state's leaders have always been shouting hoarse in this respect. Tyagbir Hem Chandra Barua wrote as far back as in 1940—"From a glance at the facts and statistics relating to the province, it appears as though, the province has already reached a point where its role of absorption has far exceeded the assimilation capacity". He quoted census figures to show how immigrants were coming every year. "The Congress which stands for the ideal of wider Indian nationalism, created in the secure foundation of the cultural anatomy of the constituent units, cannot view with equanimity the prospect of the distinct individuality being destroyed", he warned and added, "The real problem is how to control and organise immigration. To talk in terms of stopping it is to ignore realities. To talk in terms of allowing it a free pace is also to ignore certain realities and at the same time to lay the basis for future problems which will be difficult for solution".

Assam's natural resources are believed to be immense. This, coupled with the easy going and the peace loving nature of the local people, has always tempted the outsiders to come and exploit the state. Gandhiji once told some of us, "In spirit I am Assamese but I do not like one thing in them—they are lazy." Their laziness and also perhaps their open mindedness have brought the people of Assam to this state of things. When they had enough land, she accepted the land hungry people from outside and satiated their hunger but today she has nothing to give. Mother's nature is defined as *Prakriti*, *Bikriti* and *Sanskriti* in ancient literature. *Prakriti* means it is natural for a mother to feed her children. *Bikriti* means it is unnatural for a mother not to feed her children and to drive them away. *Sanskriti* means it is natural for a mother to feed the children for her neighbours before feeding her own. I have a feeling that Assam started so early with *Sanskriti* that today her own children are hungry and she does not have a

morsel to feed them. An MP. from West Bengal had once wittingly told me at Tezpur that Assam had enough land and hence, he could send some people to settle here. I replied, wittingly too, 'When we had land, we gave to others. Now we do not have. If you send more people, here will be the black hole tragedy. If thousands enter a room with accomodation only for a few, suffocation and stampede will follow.' He laughed and I laughed too. This sounded to be a joke that day (it was a decade back) but today it has come to be the reality.

AN OVER-USED MYTH

The myth that Assam has enough land is itself misplaced. Whoever believes it forgets the mighty Brahmaputra which has a total drainage area of billion Sq. km. It meanders along a 800 km. route through Assam with 120 tributaries, covers a drainage area of $\frac{1}{4}$ in its size (18000 kms). If we add to this 28000 Sq. kms. of forest land and 4000 Sq. kms. under tea, total land available for 20 million people for their inhabitation and cultivation is only 30,000 Sq. kms. Thus, the land-man ratio in Assam is the lowest in the country.

That apart, the apparent domination of outsiders in the economic, political and cultural life of Assam is also a factor of the people's unrest. The sentiments of the people were amply made clear to the nation even as far back as in 1947 when late Omeo Kumar Das said on the floor of the constituent Assembly hardly a week after the advent of freedom. "Sir, I know this is not the occasion to make any special pleading for my province, but I feel I will be failing in my duty if I did not bring to light a few facts regarding our provincial finances. My province, Assam, has been the source of contribution to the Central exchequer to the extent of nearly Rs. 8 crores annually in the shape of excise and export duty on tea and petrol. But the subvention that was given to Assam was only Rs. 30 lakhs and I do not find any change in the outlook today. I feel Sir, and regret having to say it that our leaders have not yet been able to shake off

the influence of the Government of India Act. Sir, with the installation of the Congress Ministry not only in the provinces but also in the centre, people are expecting a revolutionary change and they cannot be said to be unjustified in cherishing such expectations. We must free our administration from the shackles of this Octopus of red-tapism and we must devise some means to carry out our programmes speedily.

"Lastly before concluding, I must bring to the notice of this House another fact in which my province is interested. In the list of subjects enumerated in the Federal list of subjects, I find migration and naturalisation. To my mind it appears these two subjects also should be put in the concurrent list or the language so altered as to permit the province to have scope of action in these two subjects. Sir, I do not know how other provinces feel, but it is sore point with us. We know how mass migration into Assam has altered the very complexion of the population. With the communal Award and the communal representation it was not fair to us to allow mass migration on a large scale and in spite of the evictions that have been carried out in our province, I still find a large number of people who are not people of the province but only trespassers into Government lands, still hanging on to the province, living with their relatives. In this sphere, Sir, I want the members of the committee and especially the Mover of this Motion to think more clearly on this point and permit the provinces to have some scope in this matter. If Assam which is the homeland of the Assamese people, if they cannot be protected, for myself, I think, I have no justification to come to this House. Assamese people have a language which is a separate language and which though Sanskritic in origin has got Tibetan and Burma influence and we must protect the Assamese people. In this view of the case I appeal to the Mover of this motion to provide scope for action by the province. Sir, with these words I support the Motion moved by Shri H. Gopalaswami Ayyangar."

That was thirty two years back and even today Assam stands where she was. It is perhaps no wonder that she would do things to make herself heard by the nation.

GANDHIJI SAVED ASSAM

Assam was being forced, much against her will, to join the grouping (Group C) and would have been done for but for Mahatma Gandhi. 'My mind is made up,' he said, "Assam must not lose its soul. It must uphold it against the whole world. Else, I will say that Assam had only manikins and no men. It is an impertinent suggestion that Bengal should dominate Assam in any way. Tell the people that even if Gandhi tries to dissuade us, we would not listen. He added, 'If I bring my Gujrati manners into Bengal. . . I would expect the Bengalis to expel me'. It was a long letter handed over to two emissaries of late Gopinath Bordoloi. Bapu requested the emissaries not to divulge the contents of the letter before the decision of the congress working committee was known. Gandhiji said that in the event of the decision going against Assam he would personally go to Assam to offer *Satyagraha* and lead the movement against the Congress. However the contents of the letter leaked out even before it reached late Bordoloi. A representative of a Calcutta daily requested one of the emissaries to allow him a glance of the letter with a promise that he would not divulge a word. But every word of the letter came out the very next day under a banner headline. Gandhiji was hurt. Who knows what turn the events would have taken had the letter remained a guarded secret.

Anyway, the working committee met in a tense atmosphere with Sri Kripalani in the chair. As a representative from Assam, I had to oppose the resolution moved by Jawaharlal Nehru in the Camera session of the AICC in the Constitution House. The resolution was that sovereignty should lie in the Federal Court and not in the Constituent Assembly. I recall even now my own immediate reactions to the resolution. I had to hurt those very personalities whom I had worshipped as heroes since my childhood days. Gandhiji's blessings and the remembrance of the innocent helpless faces of the Assamese people back at home provided me the inspiration I needed. I was supported by Late J. J. M. Nichol Roy from

Khasi Hills, Sri Baidyanath Mukherjee from Cachar, and Late Horeswar Goswami. The words of Late Nichols Roy still ring in my ears. He said, 'We, the Assamese, when we say 'no', we mean 'no', when we say 'yes', we mean 'yes', we do not know how to twist 'yes' to 'no' and 'no' to 'yes'—that art, that diplomacy—we have never learnt'. Late Mridulaben Sarabhai, then the Secretary of AICC, came and requested me to withdraw the motion. But we had the day. Panditji accepted the amendment moved by Purushottam Das Tandonji. Panditji said with great emotions, "*Assam Chale Jaye to Khatre Ho Jayenge*". Gandhiji and Panditji could feel the pulse of the people. They were selfless and were statesmen. Gandhiji opposed the division of India and division of Arab as well. He was a '*Drasta*' and could correctly visualise the distant future. And today another '*Drasta*', Acharyya Vinoba, has asserted, 'It (Assam's) is not a provincial problem. It is a national problem—problem for the whole of India. Baba is against Balkanization. This problem is as important for Maharashtra as it is for Assam.' He could foresee Assam's fate long before and far back in 1962 he advised that Assam must declare herself as a *gramdani* State. She was surrounded by foreign nations and even if the whole state could not be declared as *gramdani* at least the border areas should be declared as such as a defence measure. He stressed that it was a defence measure and warned that else the people would have to repent. This is not however a new concept for Assam and was introduced in the state long ago by Sri Sankardeva and Sri Madhabdeva. The *Satras* they established were based on this concept that did not permit sale of land without the collective consent of the village. Barpeta *Satra* (the present Barpeta town) has been in a sense a *Gramdani* village where land cannot be bought or sold.

THE BRITISH GAME

Assam's strategic location needs special mention and deserves special considerations. The British officers were shrewd enough to repeatedly talk of Assam being a neglected

frontier with a definite motive. Lord Wavell, the Viceroy of India, recorded that 'the chief political problem is the desire of the Muslim ministers to increase the immigration into the uncultivated government lands under the slogan 'Grow more food', but what they are really after is 'Grow More Muslims.' He might have said it honestly, but people suspected there a smell of politics, the politics of 'Divide and Rule', the politics of antagonising one community against another.

Sir Andrew Clow, the last British Governor of Assam, had secret parleys at Kohima and observed that Nagahills must remain a national park. Perhaps he had plans to turn it into a buffer state, to have a foothold in the future. That was what prompted late Bordoloi to plead for inclusion of the sixth schedule in the Constitution.

While on their way out, the British rulers were bent upon leaving behind seeds of dissension and suspicion in the minds of the people. They harped on the themes of plainsmen's exploitation of the hills, differences between the hills and the plains in matters of food habits, dresses etc. were highlighted. It was from this backdrop that the demand for Naga independence was slowly thrown up. As a shrewd British administrator, Sir Andrew Clow was advancing cautiously and tactfully. He hinted at the establishment of a separate administration for the Naga Hills under the Central Government.

Zapo Phizo, the Angami rebel who visualised and worked for a United Nagaland comprising Naga areas of India and Burma, had been externed. He was in South East Asia for a long time before returning to Nagaland with the INA force led by Netaji Subhas. The Japanese army however had a debacle and retreated. But Phizo was no longer disturbed. He was allowed to stay back and he renewed his mission of carving out the land of his dream. Late Omeo Kumar Das, after his election to the Constituent Assembly, sought permission to visit the excluded areas to know the peoples' mind there. The Governor's Adviser allowed him, and me too, to visit Kohima and Imphal but not Mokokchung, where *Rani Gaidalo*, the rebel against the British, was camping.

The dialogue Sri Das had with Phizo was interesting. Sri

Das asked Mr. Phizo as to why he wanted his area to secede from India. Could they not preserve their basic identity even within India? What was the difficulty? Mr. Phizo retorted, 'Delhi is far away. Delhi will neglect us, and you too. So, come, let us break away from India. We consider the people of the Brahmaputra valley as our own kith and kin. The Nagas have stood by you in all circumstances. We are all of the Mongoloid stock and so let us merge ourselves with each other.'

Sri Das replied, 'We will be as far away from Delhi as from the heart of South East Asia. So why should we go for separation? Why are you afraid when Gandhiji himself is there? Don't you have any faith in Gandhiji?'

Phizo: 'Yes, we do have an implicit faith in Gandhiji.- He is as noble as our Jesus. Jesus was betrayed by his favourite follower, who knows if Gandhiji too will not be betrayed. The Indians—the people of the plains—are cunning but the hill people are simple. However, we do not regard Assam as a part of India'.

He concluded saying, 'if you do not heed me, you will repent.'

I recalled these words of Mr. Phizo in a cameral meeting of the Rajya Sabha in course of a debate on Nagaland and exhorted the central Government to try to remove such tendencies from the Nagas' hearts. My appeal was endorsed by Mr. Thanlura, a Mizo M.P. too. He added that the Mizos and clamoured for independence even before the Nagas but gave up the demand at the request of the Assam leaders. He also cautioned that if the centre yielded to the Nagas the Mozos too would renew their agitation. It perhaps needs no elaboration. Any way, it is crystal clear that the words of Mr. Phizo perfectly fitted into the scheme of the British Raj, the scheme to have an outlet through the Irawadi river of Burma was also encouraged at the same time.

Lord Mountbatten, at the request of East Pakistan, had politely asked late Gopinath Bordoloi if Assam would be kind enough to transfer Shillong to Pakistan for use as a health

resort by East Bengal since it did not have any hill station except in the Chittagong tracts. Bordoloi consulted his colleagues and pointed out, equally politely, that it would mean Assam's joining the Grouping designed by the Cabinet Mission. Lord Mountbatten understood the point and did not persist.

THE MAP THAT KILLED A POET

It was in 1966 when I suddenly came across an intriguing map with an accompanying note. I had been to the residence of late Ambikagiri Roychowdhury, the rebel poet of Assam, to offer condolences to his bereaved family following his sudden death. There I learnt from the poet's son that a map caused his father's heart failure. Naturally I grew inquisitive and wanted to have a glance. The note was initiated in Dacca and was posted from West Berlin. The paper itself was a foreign piece with a Eagle mark, it was a plan relating to eastern India. I am quoting below a few lines from the note.

"The development taking place in the Eastern States of India show that their people are also being ignored by the Delhi Government. It is only hunger and poverty that they receive. Grenades and homemade bombs were used by demonstrators in West Bengal when they express their dissatisfaction with the food situation in the State. Disorders in the State continue to this day and are being cruelly suppressed by the police and the army units.

"In the town of Agartala crowds of demonstrators attacked the central intelligence office headquarters, set fire to a police car and wrecked a telephone exchange.

"The national leaders of East Pakistan and West Bengal realize that the emancipation of their peoples from misery, hunger and lawlessness can be achieved only by uniting together in their struggle to separate from Pakistan and India in order to establish a united and Independent Bengal.

"The formation of this new country is of special interest to the Assam Hill tribes of Mizo and Naga. Naga Tribal chiefs

hope that they will be granted regional autonomy in the framework of a new state, living at present in India and Burma to reunite in order to establish a united Nagaland State.

"Mizo National Front leaders support the formation of a new country in the area, hoping that they will be allowed to establish an autonomous independent unit, Mizoland, which would include those areas of Burma and East Pakistan inhabited by Mizo tribes.

"The proposed settlement of the problem of the Assam tribes, Mizo and Naga in the framework of a new State set up is of great significance in the attainment of stable conditions in this corner of the world".

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I spoke on this map in what turned out to be the last session of the undivided Indian National Congress. I also handed over copies of the intriguing document to the Prime Minister, the Union Home Minister and several members of the Parliament. Some of them believed it was a fake paper. I however wondered and still wonder if it was.

It said, 'They are confident that free world is interested in establishing an independent state in south east Asia which could help to normalise conditions there and which would provide a shield against Chinese aggression.

"The separatist leaders are said to have agreed that a united and independent Bengal with its capital in Calcutta should include East Pakistan, the Indian states—West Bengal, Assam, Nagaland, neighbouring territories of Tripura and Manipur, Indian protectorates Sikkim and Bhutan. The territories have a total area of more than 1,70,000 square miles and a population of more than 100 million persons, 90 percent of whom speak Bengali".

The first phase of this dream, the note said, was fulfilled when East Pakistan seceded from the Islamic country. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Awami League President, had announced

their six-point plan—'Our Right to Live'—which included the demand for East Pakistan's autonomy. The demand was realised but the Sheikh was not allowed to live. Chakravarty Rajagopalachari once had said, 'Pakistan is a shadow of a ghost, I want to see the shadow.' He could see the ghost itself, to err is human.

The far-sighted and astute politicians of the West very often comment that if yellow and brown combine, the whole world will have to keep awake. They will not hence ever allow yellow and brown to come together. They will always try to drive wedges in India and the whole of Asia to suit their own convenience. They always look for a foothold here to carry on their fight. Assam, because of her strategic location, is by all standards an ideal place for them—a place that can be made into a second Vietnam.

Late Omeo Kumar Das once cautioned Pandit Nehru that wrong briefing as regards his NEFA policy might lead to great debacles for the country. The apprehensions were proved valid in 1962 when the Chinese hordes burst upon the Indian borders. He had also written to Kaka Saheb Kalelkar, the then Chairman of a Commission for Backward Classes. The letter said, "...many of us living today would be no more, but it pains me to find that we are ushering in conditions which would ensure disaster tomorrow. Separatist tendencies are developing in spite of geographical advantages, in spite of long years of historical contact, in areas which may be called the very centre of India. But here geography is not to your advantage and the ethnological composition of the people is not a source of strength for you. In this background it is a political necessity to strengthen Assam...."

THE NATION CANNOT IGNORE US

I wonder if the nation can ignore this strategic region of the country without completely jeopardising its own interests. To treat this region with indifference will only be like playing with fire. It is a sensitive border state and deserves the best

attention of the country as a whole. The sentiments of the people of the region have to be respected. They talk less but feel deeply within, they keep their calm like the green that surrounds them but can explode in volcanic wrath if things are dragged to the extreme. Even the Chinese travellers, Hiuen Tsang and Fa-Hien, had found them centuries ago to be simple, peace loving and of a little romantic type. They were and still are hospitable but they have started wondering if their traditional hospitality has not led to their present crises.

Poor economic conditions of the neighbouring areas had forced starving multitude to cross into Assam, the land with the often believed myth of plenty. India was partitioned in the name of religion but religious considerations too failed to contain the process. And immigration continued even after the country's partition from East Pakistan. Many of the immigrants have come here with a design to have land in both the countries in keeping with the outdated scheme of colonization that the world has rejected. In any case, it is crystal clear that a small state cannot go on playing host to such unbridled inflow of people without jeopardising her own prospects and her survival. This brings to my mind a past event. The Maharaja of Cooch Behar in North Bengal offered to merge his territory into Assam because of the historical relations and cultural similarities his kingdom had with Assam. Pandit Nehru had even promised that it would be done. But Sardar Patel as the then Home Minister of India decided that it would merge with West Bengal instead since that State would have to accommodate refugees from East Pakistan. And now West Bengal too might have reached the saturation point so much so that the Government there recently had to resist refugees' attempt to settle down at Marichjhanpi.

The problem of foreigners is not a matter of future concern for Assam. It has in fact already closed in on the State and has disturbed the normal equilibrium in almost every sphere of life. It has even threatened the socio-cultural survival of the people of the small state. Foreigners have even figured in the State's electoral roll thus threatening to

defile the country's constitution and alter the destiny of the State. The serious implications of the massive infiltration into Assam following the partition of the country were correctly appreciated even years back by the then Home Minister, Sardar Patel, who categorically stated that this would have to be stopped. Pandit Nehru also visualised the future complications and put the cut-off point at 1952 for the purpose of sending back the foreigners. But since then the problem has only assumed more alarming proportions and the urgent question of detection and deportation of the illegal infiltrants has never been sincerely attended to. This does not much reflect the nation's concern for Assam, its eastern sentinel.

ASSAM LOOKS TO THE NATION

'No one knows at whose bidding came streams of people that melted into the ocean of humanity', thus spoke Rabindranath in his poem '*Bharat Tirtha!*' Mahapurush Sankardeva also hailed the land, 'Glory be to *Kaliyuga* and glory be to those born in *Bharatavarsha*.' The people of Assam have always known the boundaries of their '*Punya Tirtya Bharati*' as '*Gandhara* in the west, *Kanyakumari* in the south, Himalayas in the north and *Parasuram Kunda* in the east.' Assam through her process of assimilation has grown into an India in miniature and even in recent times has not grudged the assimilation into her composite society of people from far and near. People from the farthest corners of the country have come here and have assimilated in such a way that their contributions towards the enrichment of Assam's socio-cultural and political life are recalled and remembered with pride by every one. But where there is a war of complexes, there comes the tragedy. It was in 1961 during the Chinese aggression when the local people found groups of people deserting the state to avoid the apparently imminent catastrophe. This also made the local people suspicious about the professed love of the outsiders for this land. They wondered if those people were here only to exploit this land, if Assam was for them no more than a second home, if they were friends only

at times of wealth and not at times of woe. It is however only an instance to indicate the lurking fears and apprehensions in the minds of the local people. It is now for the nation to remove these misgivings from the Assamese mind. It is for the nation to convince the Assamese that theirs is not really a 'Cinderella province' as Lord Curzon had once believed it to be.

Lovely Assam, in the depth of her heart always cherishes the tender hope and the fond feeling that the great nation of which she is proud to be an integral part will fully understand her hopes and fears, her smiles and sobs and her problems and possibilities. She knows the warmth of the nation will remove her pangs, the benign touches will make her dreams break into flowers. But just now it is perhaps ordained by history and circumstances that the country's eastern sentinel goes on looking to the nation with a question mark

ASSAM FOSTERS ASSIMILATION THROUGH THE AGES

Dr. Promod Chandra Bhattacharyya

Assam, a north-eastern frontier region, passed into the hands of the then British East India Company in the year 1826 A.D. as a sequence of Burmese invasions against the sovereign Ahom kingdom which left in the mind of the people a historically eventful record of independent reign ranging about six hundred years. It took more than sixty years to consolidate the British rule in Assam (1826) and adjoining areas of Cachar (1832), Lushai Hills (1892), Eastern Frontier Tracts (1898) and other regions. The diverse tribes and races inhabiting the north-eastern Indian states comprising of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya and Arunachal used to cherish a spirit of heroic resistance and freedom against any foreign rule or aggression even during the British rule and continually so even in the post-independent days. This spirit of heroic freedom in respect of their socio-political fields was confronted in different circumstances with the rulers and their popular agitations and revolts were subdued with the help of Police and Army mercilessly. The fire of an independent spirit burnt eternal in their mind equally in hills and plains of North-Eastern India.

A sense of outside exploitation and negligence hovered deep in the mind of all sections of primitive and original dwellers of north-eastern states side by side of the pan-Indian contacts of political and administrative machineries through

different periods of history. The historical migrations of different elements of population would testify that Assam like other north-eastern states fostered socio-cultural assimilation through the ages in spite of an apparent domination of superior elements of people from outside.

It is a fact that the green and fertile valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Surma rivers had attracted people of diverse races and dynasties through the different periods of history. These immigrant people became enchanted like sheep through natural beauties and easy economy of the land of *Kamarupa-Kamakhyā* which was known as *Pragjyotish*, *Lauhitya*, *Kamarupa* etc. in different periods and where religious principles of Mongoloid or *Kirata* origin pervaded through the Mother Goddess worship with special characteristics in liberal way of life with non-vegetarian food and rice-beers in comparison to the restricted Vedic Aryan way of strictly vegetarian food with honey and milk.

GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

The ancient Assam, known as *Pragjyotish*, *Kamarupa-Kamakhyā*, etc., stretched from the river *Kartoya* (Tista) in the west to Dikrai in the foothills of Arunachal in the east and from the hill *Kanjagiri* near Nepal in the Himalayan range in the north to the sea in the area of Chittagong (Chattagram) now in Bangladesh in the south according to the geographical boundary described in the *Kalika-Puran*, *Yogini-Tantra* etc. But the political and administrative measures have broken the geographical unit into many a province or a state in modern India. The hills, rivers and valleys with green vegetation and forests still preach the geographical unity and influence the people more or less so far the original inhabitants are concerned. The assimilation of different Austroloid and Mongoloid races and tribes with the incoming Aryans, Dravidians and later on mixed population of diverse religion and culture was possible so long the land was available, but now the children of the soil who have no other alternative to settle elsewhere are afraid of the gradual and continued

inflow of outsiders who had alternative places of abode and who appeared to occupy the areas of North-eastern India obviously for political or commercial motives. The process of assimilation is now unacceptable from the geographical perspective as the influx of foreign nationals specially from Bangladesh, Nepal and other non-Indian countries has created a serious problem not only in the land but also in the Voters' list indicating eligible citizens meant for the Election in terms of the Constitution of India. The impact and intensity of such a problem are usually misunderstood and misrepresented by our more powerful neighbours and other speakers as have been preached through some outside newspapers as well as other medium of mass publicity.

POLITICAL FACTORS

The earliest reign attributed to this region of ancient Assam noted as *Pragiyotish*, *Kamrupa*, *Lauhitya* etc. was that of the dynasty of King Ghatakasura of *Kirata* origin. The invasion of Prince Naraka from Mithila (Bihar) was attributed to be a feature of Aryanised domination over the traditional *Kirata* (Mongoloid) rule. The different dynasties of the Barman, Salastambha, Kamata, Koch and Ahom in ancient Assam showed testimony of independent rule with sovereign power through contacts with frontier kingdom in form of commercial treaties and facts. The administrative set-up of ancient Assam was based on local circumstances and owed almost nothing to the pan-Indian forms of Government. Till the advent of British rule, the political features of Assam advocated an independent and resistive policy of self-preservation and self-development while patronizing religion, art, education and culture and even establishing Aryan scholars and Brahmins in the soil of Assam. Those who came politically from outside the territory of pre-British Assam were subsequently absorbed in the soil of the region through settlement, marriage and culture exchange. But the political factors in the British rule as well as the subsequent independent period of Indian Union could not much improve the status of

the people of Assam as well as north-eastern India so far as their civic life and living are concerned. Though the people of Assam and North Eastern India took active part in earning independence of India from the British rulers, they felt the shares politically and economically due to the people were denied by their more clever and apparently dominating neighbours and elderly brothers as well as sisters of India. Mahatma Gandhi, Acharya Vinoba Bhave and a few others only could relapse the true political sentiments of the region. The political factors are co-related with economic and commercial interests. The people of the North-Eastern region do feel that they are economically and commercially exploited to the maximum. Their traditional rural and cottage industries are almost destroyed by the so-called superior and major industries of Indian and foreign capitalists. The people are without proper food, employment, education, transport as well as medical care, not to speak of advance amenities of civilised life available in Bombay, Delhi or Calcutta areas. The disparity in socio-economic development is vivid in this area and so much so in political issues like one of the expulsion of names of foreigners from the Voters' list in Assam, Meghalaya etc. The political sphere is burning like a volcano:

CULTURAL FEATURES

Assam as well as other states or North Eastern India have been maintaining primitive and original cultural features in the midst of socio-political exploitation as well as superior domination. The religious features are driven to the background through the secular character of the Constitution of India, but the common people are basically sensible to religion. Even the political and economic considerations of the Indian Union are more or less based on the religious factors of deciding minorities and majorities. The cultural life of the so-called tribes and races of Assam with different elements of caste, creed, language, religion is in a process of assimilation from the modern way of scientific development. These

varied cultural characteristics of race, language, literature, religion and arts are studied with interests all over the world by scholars and students and as such the assimilation through the ages is being fostered and appreciated by all sorts of concerned men and women.

The various Bihus and other festivals in the hills and plains of this region united the people through music and dances side by side of the unity in folk-life and rural art. The spirit of hospitability and the liberty in food, drink and social life as well as thinking are remarkable characteristics in tribal and non-tribal societies of north-eastern India. The matriarchal predominance in the society even in the patriarchal based one has made the north-eastern India really a place for the Mother Goddess since the time immemorial. Handloom and weaving are special attributes of the womenfolk in Assam through the ages. The warcloth spun and woven within a night by the wives could earn victory for their husbands during the Ahom reign. The great Saint Sankardev, the prominent writers like Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Kamalakanta Bhattacharya, Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and ideal patriots like Maniram Dewan, Kushal Konwar, Kanaklata and many others, the reputed heroes and heroines like Lachit Barphukan, Mula Gabharu, Radha-Rukmini, Jyomoti, also the martyrs of different mass movements inspire the present day youth and people for voicing their inward agonies and claims in spite of the cultural framework of assimilation and religious toleration.

ASSAM CRIES FOR JUSTICE

Sri Jadu Kakoty

Ever since Assam had saved herself from being handed over to Pakistan under the infamous Grouping Plan, due mainly to the heroic efforts of the then Assam Premier Gopinath Bardoloi, one of the tallest among the Assam leaders, Assam's new era of fight for existence began.

The fight is still on and the era continues.

Then came the mid-fifties when under the dynamic leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru exploration of oil in Assam began in a very big way. Oil and natural gas were abundantly found in upper Assam. But instead of processing the crude inside Assam, the Centre decided to pipe it out to Bihar where a giant oil refinery was proposed.

Thus began Assam's fight to establish her rightful claim, another name for her fight for existence. People in thousands offered peaceful satyagraha and were jailed. But Nehru seemed unrelenting and adamant. During the crucial days of the movement, however, Nehru went on a tour abroad and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad was looking after the routine work of the Prime Minister. The Maulana realised what was what and strongly recommended Assam's case. As a result, Assam got the first public sector refinery at Gauhati. But it was no more than a toy refinery, its capacity being a mere .75 million tonne per annum while the bulk of Assam crude was piped out to Bihar to feed a giant refinery there with an initial capacity of three-million tonnes per annum. Wonder of all

wonders, the Gauhati refinery, commissioned by Jawaharlal Nehru amidst great fanfare on first January, 1962 and dedicated to the people of India, continues to be the "Babe" among all public sector refineries ; it was not allowed to grow or expand. Presently, the plant and machineries, of this refinery have, by and large, become obsolete, resulting in frequent break-down of the plant, stoppage of production, making thereby its own contribution to the scarcity of petroleum products and hardship of consumers.

Then came the era of Petro-chemicals. Assam demanded the setting up of a refinery-cum-petrochemical complex based on Assam crude or natural gas, the exploration, discovery and production of which continued to show increasing trend. While Gujarat, another crude producing state, went about setting up giant petro-chemical complexes and fertiliser plants rather merrily, thus fully enjoying the fruit of the latest petro-chemical technology, here Assam, the pioneering state in respect of oil production and refining, continued to be ignored on one pretext or the other.

But the people of Assam though otherwise and again rose in a massive movement, demanded immediate setting up of a refinery-cum-petro chemical complex in Assam. This time lakhs of people joined the movement, were arrested and jailed. After a period of dogged opposition, the centre was at last forced to relent.

The result was the one million tonne refinery-cum-petro chemical complex at Bongaigaon, now under construction, with its original schedule of commissioning having been modified times without number on one pretext or the other.

MEMORABLE MESSAGE

In between came the said Chinese aggression days. Parts of the then North East Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh) had already fallen to the advancing Chinese forces when the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru sent his memorable message of sympathy to the people of Assam, bidding good-bye to them and virtually handing them over to

the Chinese. An ebullient Biju Patnaik had even offered to take out all people from Assam and settle them in Orissa with a view to saving them from the Chinese rule ! What a bravado ! Assam was virtually abandoned by the then custodians of the great and glorious India !

Even the on-going fertiliser plant at Namrup was ordered to be destroyed. But a senior Assamese administrator, who was then at its helm, took courage in both hands, said a firm 'no' and firmly stood his ground, saving thus a huge public sector undertaking from being blown up at the sheepish design of the then central leaders.

Assam should be thankful to the Chinese that they had unilaterally announced cease-fire and went back and did not decide to run over Assam to complete their cake-walk victory.

It may sound paradoxical, but Assam has reasons to be thankful to the Chinese that they had come upto the Assam border at least and had threatened to run over the Assam plains. Otherwise, the bridge over the Brahmaputra would have not come, nor the railway lines extended upto Murkongchelek along the north bank, nor a network of surface communication established in the region.

ILL-FATED INVESTMENT

The fate of a substantial Assam Government investment provides an interesting side-light. During 1959-60 the government of Assam spent about Rs. 83 lakhs for acquisition of land for the Gauhati refinery and on other related matters. Of this Rs. 52.64 lakhs represented the cost of land. After prolonged correspondence, the government of India agreed to convert the value of land into equity shares as investment of the government of Assam in the Gauhati refinery. But the valuation reports are yet to be received and examined by the government of India even on this twentieth year of the investment. Nobody knows when it would be done. That apart, it is not known as to what would happen to the

remaining amount, namely, over Rs. 30 lakhs, also spent by the state government for the refinery.

This then takes us to an old demand for setting up a Divisional head quarter of N.F. Railway at Rangia in Assam. Exactly ten years ago, a massive movement was launched by the people of Assam for this purpose. A reluctant centre had later asked Assam not only to provide the land free of cost to the Railway for the purpose of the Divisional Office but to bear the entire cost of development of that land also. What an astounding proposition ! Assam agreed to do both ; but, then, nothing was heard from the centre thereafter. Who knows, the Centre may now ask Assam to construct the entire buildings necessary for housing the Divisional offices and bear the expenses from the Assam coffers !

Assam continues to suffer in respect of royalty on crude oil produced in Assam. While the rate of royalty per tonne of crude has been increased from old Rs. 15.00 to only Rs. 42 years back, during the corresponding period the excise duty on petroleum products calculated on the basis of tonnage rose from Rs. 472 to Rs. 864. The world crude prices and royalties have in the meantime increased sky-high. Even the ONGC has a proposal now to increase its crude prices. But Assam, well, who cares ?

The control of the Brahmaputra, it is commonly agreed, is a stupendous task and well beyond the means of the state government for decades now, the centre has been requested to assume its Complete and direct responsibility, but without any success. On the other hand, damages caused by floods in Assam during the three-year period of 1976-78 alone amounted to about Rs. 50 crores, let alone total loss for the entire period since 1950. Here also Assam is left to fend for herself.

DISTORTIONS GALORE

Assam also suffers from lack of Centre's definite police in respect of utilisation of surplus natural gas produced from the Assam fields. There are distortions galore in this regard.

While some hold that this gas may be gainfully utilised by employing it in the thermal power plants, others volubly differ to say that it can be better utilised as cooking gas. There are yet others who hold that it can be best used as industrial fuel while some others argue that it should be used for production of fertilisers and other petro-chemicals. While the debates go on endlessly, millions of cubic feet of precious gas continue to be burnt daily, a colossal wastage. One of the country's topmost scientists, Dr. Raja Ramanna said in course of his visit to Assam some years ago that it was criminal to burn natural gas for production of electricity. In his opinion, not thermal, but hydel power generation should be accorded topmost priority in Assam. He further disclosed that while the major river systems in India had a potential of about 50,000 MW of power, the Brahmaputra alone has the potential of over 24,000 MW. And only the other day, the then Union Power Minister K. C. Pant disclosed that 12,000 MW of power can be easily generated in Assam by sparingly tapping Assam's vast hydel power potential.

Yet the per capita power consumption in Assam is only 28 units at present, against 130 units in the country.

The railway net-work in Assam presently covers 2194 kilometres out of which, only 105 kilometres are broadgauge. Important district towns of Assam like Nowgong, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Tezpur are on branch lines only. This alone shows the seriousness accorded to the development of the railways in Assam.

The river Brahmaputra at present has only one bridge over it. Work on the second bridge has just begun. In contrast, the Ganges has as many as fourteen bridges over it. What a gap !

Assam has vast mineral potential and prospects. Yet there are allegations that even the tempo of oil exploration in Assam has been kept on a low key.

Economic and technical aid and assistance from developed countries and bilateral technical and economic co-operation with friendly countries are yet to be seen in action in Assam.

Assam's tea production accounts for over 60 percent of that of the country. Yet the head offices of most tea companies are situated outside Assam and function from metropolitan centres, thus depriving Assam of many advantages inherent in them.

Assam accounts for most of the orthodox tea produced in the country. But the Gauhati Tea Auction centre is yet to be given all facilities. The demand for declaring Gauhati as a dry port has fallen into deaf ears. Adequate participation by foreign buyers in the Gauhati Tea Auction market still remains a far cry.

SAD CONCLUSIONS

Instances of depriving Assam of her due may be multiplied. The foregoing is, therefore, only illustrative and by no means exhaustive. The point is that Assam gets nothing without a fight and in most cases, Assam's fights draw a blank owing to the Centre's stony deafness and wroes.

Another sad conclusion is that Assam is not only one of the most neglected states in the country, but one of the most misunderstood states as well.

Whenever Assam voices her demand for setting up more industrial units based on her locally available resources and raw-materials, the vested interests mount an opposition to it on the plea of lack of proper market to deny Assam of her due. Again, whenever Assam demands that more and more employment avenues should be opened in Assam with proper representation for the children of the soil, the vested interests lose no time to dub it as chauvinism, parochialism or narrow provincialism. Then, whenever Assam pleads for larger initiative by the Centre for removal of grave imbalance and for facilitating rapid industrialisation of Assam, the vested interests argue that a so-called favourable industrial climate must first be created and the basic infra-structure built. And whenever Assam stresses the need for building the basic economic and social infra-structure including advance man-power planning, the vested interests take shelter under so-called financial

constraints and do nothing more than throwing up more crumbs into her lap.

It has become a ritual on the part of the more privileged ones to say that for Assam's ills, the people of Assam alone are responsible, because they allegedly lack in necessary drive and initiative to improve their own lot. The more clever and manipulative among them even go about doing painstaking research work to discover that some historical reasons are there behind this lack of drive and initiative on the part of the people of Assam. Only recently a very senior administrator who has put in nearly thirty years' service in Assam remarked leisurely that instead of being bitterly engaged in fights to secure Assam's demands, the people of Assam should in a big way migrate to other states and thus begin their offensive thereby forcing others to go into defensive.

Like that Queen of England who had advised the poor Englishman who could not even afford loaves to change to cakes !

WHAT NEXT

What, then, is the way out of this baffling position ?

There are proofs, if proof is needed, to show that continued and unmitigated economic and social negligence gives rise to intense political anger and worse. Underestimation of a people's anger may act as a boomerang and a time may come when bigger issues may be involved and bigger forces invoked.

All that Assam immediately needs is, therefore, not boastful patronage, nor undue favour, nor any kindly gestures, but justice, pure and simple. No amount of lipful sympathy or high-sounding theories can silence the explosive Assamese mind now.

THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY : ITS CIVILISATION

Pratap Chandra Choudhury

Source and Courses of the River : The origin of the source of the Brahmaputra centres round the episodes of our Lord *Brahma* and *Parasurama*, son of *Jamadagni*, as narrated in the Indian scriptures, particularly in the *Kalika Purana*, a monumental treatise, composed in Assam in or about the 10th Century A.D. It is stated that the Brahmaputra (son of Brahma), born of *Amogha* was placed by her husband *Santanu* within four mountains of *Kailasa*, *Gandhamadana*, *Jarudhi* and *Sambartaka* in the shape of water which went on increasing in volume like the moon :

तेषां मध्ये स्वयं कुण्डं पर्वतानां विधेः सूतः
कृत्वातिवृद्धे नित्यं शरदीव निशाकरः ॥ 82-37

Parasurama, on the advice of his father, went to the Mahakunda, named *Brahmakunda*, to take his bath for atonement of his sin of killing his own mother. After taking bath and drinking its water, he was relieved of his sin and then striking with the help of his axe (making a passage) spread the waters (of the Brahmaputra) on the earth :

तस्य पापस्य मोक्षाय स्वपितुश्चोपदेशतः ।
स जगाम महाकुण्डं ब्रह्माख्यं स्रातुमिच्छया ॥
तत्र स्रात्वा च पीत्वा च मातृहत्यामपानयन् ।
वीर्यो परशुना कृत्वा तं मह्यमवतारयत् ॥ 82/42-43

Rising from the *Brahmakunda*, the Brahmaputra falls in the *Lohita Sarovara* of the valley of the *Kailasa*. *Brahma* himself calls the river *Lohita-Ganga*, and as it arises from the *Lohita Sarovara*, its name became *Lohit* :

ब्रह्मकुण्डात् सूतः सोऽयं कासारे लोहिताह्वये ।
कलासोपत्यकायान्तु न्यपतद् ब्रह्मणः सूतः ॥ 83-30
तस्य नाम स्वयं चक्रे विधिर्लोहितगङ्गकम् ।
लोहितात् सरसो जातो लोहिताख्यस्ततोऽभवत् ॥ 83-33

There are two pools of water, sacred to the Hindus : *Brahmakunda* and *Parasuramakunda* in the *Mishmi* hills, a spur of the *Himalayas*. *Parasurama* made the water flow from the former and hence is the name of the *kunda*, and as the river is taken to have originated from the pool of water named *Lohit*, the river also came to be known as the *Lohit*. The pool of water in which *Parasurama* took his bath came to be known as the *Parasuramakunda*. There had been topographical changes in the said spot, caused particularly by the earthquake of 1950 and *Parasuramakunda* had to be reclaimed by the State Government.

That *Parasurama* at one time came up to the said region, is found echoed in a record of about the 11th century A.D. of the *Kamarupa* ruler *Indrapala*. If, however, following the traditional accounts, the Brahmaputra is to be identified with the *Lohit*, its length shall have to be greatly minimised. But the fact is otherwise. The Brahmaputra is the "river of the very first rate magnitude" and its tributaries have made it "out-rival the great Ganges itself in its tribute to the ocean". This river has aptly been "classed among the largest in the world, being inferior to but a few in the length of its course and a still higher rank among the great streams The river after its entrance into the valley receives the water of the *Kundil* and the *Digar* The other great sources of the Brahmaputra are the *Dihing* and the *Dihong* rivers."

Many explorers in the past tried to trace out the source of origin of the Brahmaputra. A list of stages from *Sadiya* to

Tibet is given by Lt. Neuville in 1825. Mr. Needham in 1885-86 proceeded as far as the Rima Valley in Tibet. "In 1886-87 the Sanpo was visited by a native explorer, who stated that he followed the course nearly 100 miles south of Gya-La-Sindong to a place called Onlet." Mr. Allen states that the river has been traced continuously for a distance of 850 miles eastwards to Gya-La-Sindong...but no explorer has succeeded in following the river down its junction with the Brahmaputra." But, in any case, this is the Dihong river, a tributary of the Brahmaputra. The Tsanpo of Tibet pours its water through the Dihong into the Brahmaputra. Taking its rise near the upper waters of the Indus-Sutlej or near the Manasasarovara in the Mariam-La, a peak of the Himalayas, the Tsanpo having a total length of about 2,880 k.m. flows for about half its length in a trough, north of the Himalayas running parallel to the main Himalayan range. Then it swings north-east, runs through a number of gorges in a series of cascades and rapids, makes a slight bend, runs south and south-east. After receiving the waters of the tributaries, the united stream from this point flows about 720 k.m. down the Assam Valley in a vast sea of water, dotted with numerous islands, with an average distance of about 80 k.m. from any plain area to the river. With its main tributaries Subansiri, Bharali, Barnadi and Manas on the north bank and the Buridihing, Disang, Dikhow, Dhansiri, Kapili, Kulasi, Krisnai on the south in the main, this mighty river receives the drainage of the Himalayas in the north and the Assam range in the south, and traversing the entire valley from Sadiya to Dhubri, continues its course round the western spurs of the Garo Hills, joins the Ganges at Goalunda, from which point the river flows under the name of Padma and reaches the Bay of Bengal by the broad estuary of the Meghna.

So, natural history undoubtedly proves that the Brahmaputra of the plains of Assam and of the Indian literary traditions is the continuation of the Dihong, the Tsanpo of Tibet. The Lohit, rising from the north-eastern spur of the Himalayas possibly got blocked due to natural causes at a point where the two Kūṇḍas, already referred to, lie side by side and was made to flow by some human agencies, if not by

Paraśurama himself. Flowing in a south-western direction rather horizontally, the other tributaries like the Dibong and Dihong, itself appear to have fallen straight, though in a zig-zag way on this Lohit and though their junctions are not the same, the united stream came to be known as the Brahmaputra, because of the sanctity attached to it, as also the Lauhitya Sindhu, whose water is considered sacred, that one gets emancipation by taking bath in it :

स्रति लौहित्यतोये य स याति ब्रह्मणः पदम् ।
लौहित्यतोये यः स्रति सः कैवल्यमवाप्नुयात् ॥ 83/37

Early inscriptions of Kamarupa begin with an invocation of this Lauhitya for protecting all by removing the dirt of the Kali age and offering blessings (Bargaon copper plate grant of Ratnapala, V. 2). Though the river passes through North and East Bengal (West Bengal and Bangladesh), the Lauhitya is intimately associated with Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa, the ancient name of Assam. The Brhatsamhita (XIV, 6 ; XVI, I) and the Raghuvamśa (IV, 81-84), the Epics and a few Puranas make this historical reference. Even the Nikayas (Digha, I, 224 ; Samyutta IV, 117) make mention of the country of the Lohicca (Lauhitya). Assamese chronicles and the Persian sources speak of the naval battles fought on the banks of the river, right from Dhubri upto Sadiya and of its economic resources, during the medieval period of Assam's history.

Topography of the valley : Soil and Climate :

Enchanted by the panoramic beauty of the valley of the Brahmaputra surrounded all along by hills and dales and having seen with their own eyes the noble works of civilisation of the people inhabiting the region, some early European writers have made their observation in eloquent terms. Speaking from the angle of advantages the valley provides, Mr. M. Cosh states thus : "Its climate is cold, healthy and congenial ; its numerous crystal streams abound in gold dust...its mountains are pregnant with precious stones ; its atmosphere is perfumed

with tea and its soil is so well adopted to all kinds of agricultural purposes that it might be converted into one continued garden of silk and cotton, tea, coffee and sugar, over an extent of many hundred miles". But nature has been vying with man in changing the landscape and almost effacing the work of art and culture of its people. In this extensive valley, "ruins of splendid temples are discovered in wastes and forests long since forgotten. Large tanks, overgrown and choked up with brashwood, point out the situations of once populous cities."

Speaking of the disadvantages of the soil of the valley, the noted historian Mr. Gait remarks, "that in the distant past the inhabitants of the country . . . attained considerable powers and a fair degree of civilisation." But only a few materials of the time have come down to us. It is because the "valley is an alluvial country, and the impetuous snow-fed rivers find so little resistance in its friable soil that they are constantly carving out new channels and cutting away the banks; consequently no buildings erected in their neighbourhood can be expected to remain more than a limited time." This was more true of Sadiya, Tezpur, Guwahati and many other places. In Guwahati, the ancient *Pragjyotisapura*, the capital of Assam for centuries, only a negligible "portion of its former extent and grandeur remains; its mortars and earthenware constitute a large proportion of the soil, its numerous spacious tanks, the works of tens of thousands, the pride of its princes and the wonder of the present day, are now choked up with weeds and jungles or altogether effaced by a false luxuriant soil that floats on the stagnant water concealed beneath; the remains of extensive fortifications may still be traced for miles in its mounds and ditches." The architectural remains of Tezpur including those of Dah Parvatia of the 5th century A.D. and of Bamuni hills also speak of the former grandeur of the second capital city of the Kamarupa rulers. Tezpur "must have been the capital of a sovereign prince, or a principal seat of the Hindu religion, enjoying large share of prosperity at some remote period."

The nature of the soil, climate, rainfall, flood and erosion

and earthquakes occurring at intervals had been responsible for decay and destruction of the culture of the valley, that struck the eyes of the Europeans for its magnificent past. The conditions were created by the changes in the topography of the valley, caused by the Brahmaputra and its turbulent tributaries. The causes of flood and widespread havoc caused by it almost annually in the land are to be found in the conditions of the courses of the rivers and the rapid silting of their beds. Accumulation of snow at the upper course of the Brahmaputra and the monsoon period, starting from April, causing heavy rainfall bring about flood and erosion. During rains the rivers, whose number probably exceeds that of any other country in the world of equal extent, carry volumes of detritus which are again carried to the parent stream, aggravating flood congestion and adding to the silt-charge of the flood and creating conditions for large scale erosion. The soil, so formed, is no doubt friable, resulting in the tortuosity of the streams and frequent shifting of the river courses. The danger is further increased if during the rainy season, earthquakes occur. The tremor of 1950 changed, for instance, the topography of the upper valley. There had been land slides, the river beds became shallow and its carrying capacity got reduced, with the result that there had been on-rush of water during rains, inundating the plains and causing destruction to forests and cultivation and to human and animal life.

A vivid description of the flood havoc is given by an early European writer which is true also of the present day Assam. "The native anchors his boat in his roof-tree, performs his oblations on his flooded hearth, and drags his net in his tobacco garden; where the oxen lately ploughed, they swam across to higher pasture, where a field of grain a short time before waved in the rising sun, naught now waves but the muddy water; the sites of large villages are known only by their roofs above the stream; and the situations of others are pointed out only by a few palm trees weeping over the drowned and deserted foundations." The loss sustained by the people of the valley, rich and poor due to flood has been colossal and with them it has become a permanent nightmare.

The State Government took and has been taking some measures to cope with the problem of protecting the people from flood and erosion, but these have been found more or less ineffective. A national approach to it has been found essential and in recent years the Brahmaputra Flood Control Commission has been set up, and some measures like dredging the river bed and erecting embankments on its banks have been taken in hand. The embankments raised by the State Government to protect certain places from the flood havoc like Dibrugarh, Kajuli and Palasbari have been of no avail, and erosion has already eaten up the once prosperous towns and villages, including great centres of trade and culture. These measures are moreover found to have deprived some rural areas of water and silt, required for making the soil fertile, while protecting the others from the severity of the flood-havoc. The flood protection measures should be based on hydrological data and researches. Soil erosion may be controlled to some extent by scientific management of the forests and proper training of rivers. Afforestation may be considered essential against both flood and erosion.

A fertile valley though, "its climate is damp and relaxing, so that, while the people enjoy great material prosperity, there is strong tendency towards physical and moral deterioration." The nature of the soil again attracted people from different neighbouring areas, including those of the hills, and those with political ambitions started political rivalries for establishment of their principalities. The process not only led to the "considerable mixing of races" but also to centuries-old struggle for power between the Ahom, Kachari-Jaintia and the Koch ruling families in the main. This trend went on and the contemporary literature depicts "how a brave and vigorous race may decay in the 'sleepy hollow' of the Brahmaputra valley."

Besides these, the valley has received all the good and evil effects of the climate, bestowed by the river system and the adjoining forests and hilly areas. The Muslim chronicler Shihabuddin Talish in 1662 speaks of the varying congenial climate of the areas on the banks of the Brahmaputra and

those of the regions lying at a distance from the river banks. Then again, the northern bank appears to be more healthier than the southern one, which is due to moisture and dampness, caused by the rivers and forests. So, besides the hills and the forests, the Brahmaputra has been playing an important role in determining the climate of the valley, through moisture and humidity in summer and fog in winter it causes Malaria, Typhoid, dysentery, small-pox, gout etc., are the most common diseases of the valley. Even so, "Assam enjoys a far more peculiarly temperate climate . . . than it is throughout India. The warm weather is very moderate and throughout the year the nights are cool and refreshing."

Ethnology and Nature of Assam's Culture : Demography :

Lying at one of the great migration routes of mankind, the valley and the adjoining hilly areas received waves after waves of migrants of diverse origin, constituting the branches of the Negritos, the Austric, the Indo Mongoloid and the Alpine-Aryan. "The foundation of Assam's culture was perhaps laid by all these elements" and contributed "to the development of a heterogeneous socio-religious complex. While the tribal elements owe a great deal for the origin of their culture to the earlier elements, including the Negritos, the Austro-Asiatics and the Tibeto-Burmans, the civilisation of the valley is fundamentally based on the Alpine-Aryan system. The survivals of the Austric and the Tibeto-Burman culture may be noticed particularly in the names of places, rivers and other physical features throughout Assam." The Assamese vocabularies also contain specimens from their dialects. This is proved as well by the pre-historic archaeology including neoliths that depict a picture of the lithic-prehistoric culture of greater Assam. The predominance of the Aryan-Hindu culture is found in the historical monuments and volumes of literature, that have come down to us. Even so, in the plains itself there had been admixture of the peoples of diverse ethnic groups who jointly contributed to the growth of the civilisation of the valley, and hold links with the people of the Indo-Gangetic plain, including Mithila, Magadha, Utkala, and Gauda-Vanga.

It is therefore proved that from very early times there had been migration and settlement of the people of various racial origin resulting in the increase of population of the valley and changing its demography in gradual processes. The reasons were political and economic. To this were added other factors, equally potent at different ages of Assam's past history. Throughout the Ahom period there had been continuous growth of population, and on strategic and economic grounds the individual rulers established settlements of new population in both the urban and rural areas. The land surveys and census of population that were undertaken by them starting from the ruler Pratap Sinha for determining in the main, the strength of the Pikes, who formed the backbone of the Ahom polity, show this gradual increases of population before the Moamaria revolts and the Burmese invasions during the latter part of the 18th and the early part of the 19th centuries. During the time of Rajeswar Sinha (1751-1769) the valley had a population of about 17 lakhs, which together with that of the hills accounted for 24 lakhs. This figure was reduced to about more than one half, due to the reasons stated above. "In 1835 the total population of the entire valley was estimated to be 7,99519." This picture was just after the occupation of Assam by the East India Company.

With the consolidation of their conquests and as a result of the improvement made by the British rulers in communications and by opening up Agro-Industries like the Tea Industry and the mines like oil and colliery, for which labour population was required to be imported from outside the State, there had been gradual increase of population. To this was added the families of the administrators and the clerks whom the British brought from Bengal and other places, and the influx of land hungry souls chiefly from East Bengal and Nepal. And this process of their settlement in both the urban and rural areas completely changed the demography of the valley. We have figures of the alarming growth of population since 1901. For tea estates alone, labourers from Orissa, Bihar, U.P., Madras, etc. were imported and in the said year the figure stood at

6,54,000 (including Sylhet), about 1/10th of the total population. Between 1911-20 the imported labour population stood at 7,69,000 and during 1921-30 the figure was 16,90,000. The census of 1951 shows that about 12% of the total population is supported by the tea industry. There were also ex-tea garden labourers, enumerated as indigenous.

The Farm labourers from East Bengal settled generally in the Char areas of Goalpara between 1891-1911, and then they started moving to other rural areas. Between 1911-12, their number stood at 2,64,000 which in 1921 went up to 3 lakhs. In 1931 the figure stood at 5,75,000. Commenting on this phenomenal influx of the Farm labourers, who settled permanently in the valley Mr. Mullan, the then Census Commissioner of Assam records thus : this influx is "likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than the Burmese invaders of 1820 the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilisation". His successor Mr. R.B. Vaghaiwalla in 1951 estimated that during 1931-51 the immigrants from East Bengal was 4,30,000 which is exclusive of the earlier settlers shown as indigenous to Assam. The total settlers in 1951 therefore stood at 15 lakhs which went on increasing as indicated by the census figures of 1961 and 1971.

Political Geography and History :

Assam valley extends not merely from Dhubri to Sadiya, but also to the west and south-west to include portions of north Bengal (now West Bengal) and south-east Bengal (now Bangladesh) stretching to the sea not merely geographically but also culturally. This refers to the earliest period when Bhagadatta, the friend of the Kurus and son of Naraka-Bhauma flourished. So, beginning with the 1st-2nd century A.D. at least the western boundary of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa extended even beyond the traditional like, i.e. the river Karatoya and the south-western boundary touched the Bay of Bengal. During the period of the Varman line of kings, particularly in the 6th-7th century under Bhutivarman and Bhaskaravarman, as shown by the Nidhanpur grant of the

latter and other sources, *Pundravardhana Bhukti* and the Gauda capital Karnasuvarna were under Kamarupa which also included portions of South-east Bengal. Harsadeva of the next line of rulers of 8th century conquered more lands in the west including Gauda, Magadha, Kalinga and Kośala. The western limit of the kingdom with varying fortunes, was kept intact during the time of Ratnapala and Indrapala, as shown by their records. This wide region of Kamarupa is confirmed by the literary evidence including the Puranas and the Tantras. The *Kalika Purana* (51/56) fixes the western boundary at the Karatoya and the eastern one at the river Dikrong. The *Yogini Tantra* fixes the same boundary thus :

*Nepalasya Kañcanadrim Brahmaputrasya samgamam /
Karatoyam samarabhya yavad Dikkaravasinim //I/11*

The kingdom is divided into four sacred pithas of *Ratna, Kama, Svarna* and *Saumara*. Political geography of the valley underwent major changes with the decay of the Pala line of kings and the coming of the Tai Ahoms in the beginning of the 13th century A.D. With the accession of Suhungmung (A.D. 1497-1539) the expansion of the Ahom kingdom started. He is said to have driven away the Muslim invaders beyond the Karatoya. This happened before the rise of the Koch power in North Bengal under Naranarayana, whose political sway extended at least to Hajo in Kamrup. The political rivalry between the Ahom in the east and Koch in the west in which the Muslims also became involved retarded the process of expansion of the Ahom power in the western direction. Not to speak of Goalpara, even Kamrup proper changed hands beginning with the first half of the 17th century between the Ahoms and the Moguls till under Gadadhar Sinha in 1682 the last Muslim invaders are driven out from Guwahati. In between this period and at a subsequent time some posts in Goalpara like Rangamati and Hadira Choki on the river Manas were under the control of the Ahom rulers, but in fact this river remained as the western boundary of the Ahom kingdom for all purposes till 1826. The political boundaries of the valley

therefore fluctuated first among the Chutiyas of the Subansiri-Sadiya region, the Ahoms of the southern bank of the Brahmaputra in its eastern and central part and the Koches in the west and the Muslims till the British created the present boundary in the west, dividing west Bengal from Assam and extending their control over the rest of the plain and the hilly areas of the region step by step, including the frontier tracts of the Balipara and Sadiya. This arrangement continued till they left the country. But, with the Independence of the country major changes have been affected in the political geography of the region that was Assam, having cut it into pieces and creating the States of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Arunachal and Mizoram. Along with this operation Assam has lost as it were her soul, the geographical entity and cultural homogeneity in the midst of diversities, for both the plains and hill people had been one in many essential details displayed through their united efforts in repelling series of Muslim invasions and fighting against the Britishers.

Viewed in the said perspective, the political and cultural history of the valley should be taken to have changed its colour beginning with the 13th-14th century A.D. Sukapha, their leader set his foot on the valley in A.D. 1228 and since then under his successors the Ahoms both by diplomacy and wars defeated their contemporary powers and started their career of expansion in all directions. Their great conqueror Suhungmung annexed the Chutiya kingdom of the north-eastern region on the north bank of the Brahmaputra and drove the Kacharis not only from the plains, but also from their capital Dimapur. The Bhuyan chiefs of the north bank were also brought under their control. The Muslim invasion led by Turbak in 1532 was crushed.

There was another contemporary kingdom in the western part of the valley, that of the Kamatas, which fell under the might of Hussain Shah in 1498. Its ruler Durlabhanarayana in particular contributed to the enrichment of the Assamese literature during the 14th century A.D. A new kingdom of the Koches in Koch Bihar sprang up on the ruins of the Kamata kingdom under Bisva Sinha, who was the contemporary

of Suhungmung. Since then Ahom-Koch political rivalries, augmented by Muslim incursions, till the time of Pratap Sinha-Rudra Sinha (A.D. 1696-1714) dominated the life of the valley. The 17th century A.D. witnessed a prolonged conflict between the Ahoms and the Moguls; but previous to this the Koch ruler Naranarayana and through his conquests and those of his brother Sukladhvaj dominated for about three decades the political life of the valley. The period of his reign (1540-84) was equally significant for the development of Assamese literature, culture and neo-Vaisnavism, propagated by Srimanta Sankaradeva under the patronage of the ruler. In fact, Naranarayana and his successors contributed immensely to Assamese culture in all its branches including architectural; the re-constructions of the temples of Kamakhya and of the Haya-griva Madhava at Hajo are attributed to this royal family.

It was in 1613 due to the family quarrels that the Moguls took possession of Koch Hajo and when Baliñarayana sought the help of the Ahom ruler Pratap Sinha, Ahom-Mogul conflict started. The main theatres of war were Hajo, Pandu, Srighat, Guwahati, Kajali, Kaliabar, Simalugarh and Samdhara. The Mogul army under Hakim and Abu Bakar was destroyed. For more than two decades from 1617 to 1639 the Ahoms fought with the Moguls terrible naval battles in the said places, and during this period Koch-Hajo changed hands several times with the consequence that by the treaty of 1639 Kamrup proper including Guwahati passed into the hands of the Moguls.

Jayadhvaj Sinha (1648-63) taking advantage of the Mogul war of succession, recovered Koch-Hajo. This act and the non-fulfilment of the terms of the treaty led Aurangzeb to send Mir Jumla, who in 1662 after several naval fights and storming the forts at Dhubri-Jogighopa, Srighat, Pandu, Guwahati, Kajali, Kaliabar, Simalugarh and Samdhara, arrived at the Ahom capital Garhgaon. In 1663 a treaty was concluded by which Kamrup was again transferred to the Moguls. Muslim Thanadars like Rashid and Firoz were stationed in undisputed possession of their territories in the west till 1679. The battle of Srighat (Saraighat) on the bank of the Brahmaputra fought

in 1671 between the Assamese soldiers led by Lachit Bar Phukan and the Moguls under Ramsingh who invaded Assam at the behest of Aurangzeb decided the fate of the Mogul empire in the east once for all, as the Moguls were crushed by the Assamese soldiers. This naval battle has remained as a glorious event in the annals of Assam. Though in 1679 the Moguls again attempted to retrieve their losses, Gadadhar Sinha in 1682 did away with the last vestiges of the Mogul sway over Kamrup, extending the limits of Assam to the river Manas, which remained as its western boundary till the curtain falls on the mighty Ahom Royal family in 1826.

Gadadhar Sinha's successor Rudra Sinha (1696-1714), the Sivaji of the east, making extensive conquests at the cost of the Kacharis, the Jaintias and other neighbouring small powers, organised a Hindu confederacy of the *Rajas* of Hindustan with a view to ousting the Moguls from atleast the eastern part of India and a strong army of 4 lakhs was mobilised at Guwahati. Everything was ready to invade the Mogul territories in November, 1714 but the king died suddenly in September the same year. Of the four sons of Rudra Sinha, Siva Sinha (1714-44) patronised Saktism through Krishnananda, brought from Nadia who was established at Kamakhya. The last son Lakshmi Sinha was succeeded by Gaurinath Sinha (1780-94) during whose time and that of his predecessor, the great Moamaria revolts took place. The disturbances originating from a sentimental reason, wounding the feelings of the *Mahantas*, took a socio-political colour of the vast magnitude and so wide-spread was the malady that the British intervention was found necessary. Purnanda Burhagohain tried his best to quell the rebellions, but of no avail and Gaurinath fled from Rangpur, the Ahom capital to Guwahati and sent for British assistance. Captain Welsh with sepoy came to Assam (1792-93) and succeeded in suppressing the rebellions both in the lower and upper valley. This provided an opportunity to the authorities of the East India Company to exact commercial concessions and to interfere in the internal affairs of the Ahoms in future.

The reign of Chandrakanta Sinha, who ascended the

Ahom throne in 1811 was memorable in the history of Assam in that the most serious crises in the shape of the Burmese invasions took place, which brought about the downfall of the Royal family that ruled the valley with varying fortunes for about 600 years. The tragic drama started with the first invasion in 1817, which took place at the instance of the Barphukan at Guwahati, Badanchandra to whom Purnananda Burhagohain was like an eye-sore as the latter practically ruled the kingdom as was demanded by the exigencies of the situation obtaining in the country at that time. The Burhagohain in fact died just at a time when the Burmese crossed the frontiers and made some progress in their march towards the Ahom capital. During the invasions Chandrakanta was replaced by Purandar Sinha in 1818, but the former seized the throne again in 1821 through the help of the Burmese, against whom he had to fight and to leave the country. Ultimately in 1822 on his invitation the British entered Assam in 1824, who started expelling the Burmese from the valley. By the treaty of Yandaboo, entered between the British and the Burmese in February 1826, Assam passed into the hands of the East India Company. Purandar Sinha was installed in Upper Assam as a tributary *Raja* in 1833, but on one pretext or the other the Company took over the administration of the valley in 1838. Subsequently Sadiya and the Muttok country in the extreme north-east were annexed.

Under the British, particularly under the commissionership of Mr. D. Scott, Robertson and Major Jenkins certain administrative measures were taken to improve the political and material condition of the valley. From 1874 to 1905 administration of Assam was placed under chief-commissionership starting with R. H. Keatings. In 1904 Assam was amalgamated with East Bengal and a new province of East Bengal and Assam was created. Assam again became a separate province under a Chief-commissioner in 1912 and a full-fledged one in 1921 under the first Governor Nicholas Beatson Bell, and this arrangement continued till the country became independent in 1947.

In spite of the many benevolent measures, taken for the

material improvement of the people of the valley and of the adjoining regions, there had been seething discontent among all sections particularly the poor cultivators, starting from the occupation of the land, and in 1828 there was an organised revolts against the British which took a serious turn in 1830 and 1857-58 during which the patriots like Peoli Phukan and Moniram Dewan became martyrs. The revolts of 1942-43 were more wide-spread and countless became the *Swahids* in the struggle for the Independence of India, which have added a golden leaf to the annals of the country. Whatever improvement the valley has made in modern times under Independent India, a large share of the credit undoubtedly goes to the local people, who therefore desire equitable distribution of the resources of the valley between them and those engaged in exploiting them, through active participation uniformly in Agro-industrial and Industrial enterprises, which in years to come are expected to increase in volume and varieties or should be so enhanced as to serve the best interest of the country and to find avenues for employment of the local youths in large numbers.

Impact on Cultural Development : Economic Pursuits :

The land system of the valley has largely been moulded by the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. Flora, including medicinal herbs, Fauna and the forest wealth of the valley are too well known to be repeated here. So are its mineral resources. The categories of soil, alluvial, laterite and red loam are to be found distributed, and for different uses land has been divided into *Vasti*, *Rupit*, for winter crops and *Faringati* for summer rice, sugarcane, mustard seed and other crops. For revenue purposes the pre-British rulers of the valley divided the land system into *Kheraj* (full revenue) *Nisfkheraj* (half assessed) and *Lakheraj* (revenue free). The British introduced major changes in the system of land tenure. Though under the existing system, essential details of the previous one have been retained, some plots of revenue free land, donated to the temples and the Satras, have been taken over by the State Government.

With the blessings conferred by the river system there is a great scope for more production of rice, jute, pulses mustard, sugarcane and other crops through the use of improved method of agricultural implements, irrigation, by utilising fertilisers and training, to be imparted to the agriculturists. Even so, the picture that we get about the price-index in the past depicts a happy state of affairs in respect of the out-put of varied crops, and that, those who could not produce their own articles, were in a position to purchase them for their own use or exchanged them for the articles they produced.

Captain Welsh (1793) quotes the prices of rice at 600 pounds per rupee ; buffalo—Rs. 5 each and Cow—Rs. 2 each. An inscription, dated A.D. 1739 and other contemporary records quote the prices thus : Rice—varying from 2—1/5 annas to 8 annas per md.; milk 2—1/2 annas ; gram 4 annas ; *gur* 1—1/4 annas to 2—1/2 annas ; salt and oil 4—3/4 annas ; black pepper—Rs. 20 ; betel leaf—20 to 40 bundles of 20 leaves—1 anna ; earthen pitcher—224 to 643 per rupee ; areca nut—5, 120 per rupee, *mati kalai* 5 to 10 annas per md ; pulses and ghee—10 annas ; oil 3—1/3 per md. ; goat Rs. 1 ; Duck—1 anna ; pegion—1 pice ; *dhuti*—5 annas and *gamocha* 6 pice each.

Besides agricultural products, nature has bounteously conferred on the valley the facilities for producing tea, oil, coal, timber, ivory, musk, agaru and other valued economic products in abundance.

Since the discovery of the tea plants in upper Assam valley between 1820-26 by the Bruce brothers and initiative taken by Mr. Jenkins, a major change was brought in the Agro-Industrial life of the country. Manufactured Assam tea was sent to London as early as 1838. Tea Companies were formed and vast areas in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang in the main were brought under tea cultivation, mostly by foreign concerns. Hundreds of tea gardens have come up in recent times, and the out-put has been enormous. The Industry has been contributing substantial "amount to the Governemnt revenue from export and excise duties and Income-tax, besides earning valuable foreign exchange." More than 50% of the tea produced in

India is now from the Assam valley and in terms of forign exchange alone, of the total amount of Rs. 5,309 crores earned by India during the period 1947-48 to 1979-80, Assam tea contributed about Rs. 3716 crores.

Tea Industry has been the main stay of the plywood Industry in Assam and been creating market for Indian fertilisers, an important centre of which is Numrup, and Assam coal. Even so, it is to be seriously considered why Assam should not derive maximum benefit from the Industry, why the mass people cannot purchase tea at a fair price and why the local people should permanently be debarred from getting the advantage that nature has so lavishly bestowed on their own soil.

Near the tea gardens are to be seen oil fields. Mr. Bruce discovered oil in upper Assam in 1828 and Major White in the hot-springs of the Namdang river in 1837. Since then oil was found in an extensive area of Makum, Digboi and other places. The Assam Railway and Trading Company erected a small refinery at Digboi in 1893 and later on at Margherita in 1896. In 1900 a full-fledged Company was started at Digboi. In 1921 the B.O.C. took over its management. From 1934 to 52 the A.O.C. a subsidiary company of the B.O.C. produced more out-put of refined oil (Petroleum). New discoveries of the oil fields at Naharkatia, Moran, Hugrijan and other places during 1952-54 increased the capacity of the Digboi Refinery. Oil fields were also found at Rudrasagar and the adjoining areas of Sibsagar, and to cope with the increased volume of crude oil, refineries were installed at Guwahati and Barauni in Bihar. Phenomenal improvement in the Industry has been made in recent years by the O.N.G.C. and the put-put of oil and gas has marked a further rise. The establishment of the Petro-chemical complex at Bongaigaon is expected to produce products of great economic value, providing as well employment opportunities to the local youths like the paper Mill project at Jogighopa, as these concerns go on expanding. Like tea, Assam oil, the liquid gold, has been contributing a lot to the economic wealth of the country. However, this State is yet to derive benefit, which is reasonably due to her that may help her,

adequately so as to take up measures that may lead to the material advancement and welfare of her inhabitants. It is good that Government have taken over the A.O.C. and other Companies of Assam with retrospective effect from January, 1977.

Another economic wealth of the valley is coal which was discovered by Mr. Welcox at Barhat in 1825, and Mr. Bruce in 1828 extracted the material from near Safrai. Coal was also found near Jaipur. Mr. Mallet found coal in the Makum area. Subsequently it was discovered in a large area of Ledo, Margherita, Namdang and Tirap. Operations were carried on, on a large scale in the mines, and under the management of the Coal India many collieries were opened. Though Assam produces a very small percentage of this material, as compared to the national out-put, it has no doubt helped in the growth of a number of industries, including the net-work of Railways, both inside and outside the State.

From the very early period of its history, the valley has been noted also for minerals like gold, iron and lime, and besides their local use, a substantial portion of the same had been exported to other lands. "Gold-dust is found in almost all the mountain streams that flow into the Brahmaputra, and even in the great river itself as far down as the hill Nugharbera. A good amount in the shape of revenue came to the Ahom exchequer from the gold washers, called Sonowals who worked in the river Subansiri. "Raheswar Sinha (1751-69) is reported to have taken as much as 25,000 oz. of gold every year from the people of upper Assam. During 1903-04 Mr. Maclaren found gold dust in Buridihing and the Brahmaputra above Sadiya, Dibong, Dihong and Subansiri. This practice of gold washing has in course of time been discontinued, and no attempt has so far been made to explore the source of origin of this precious metal, which in the past, helped the people and the State in a number of ways.

In the development of rural economy the varied Cottage Industries have been playing a pivotal role, and Assam has been noted for her metal, ivory, wood, cane and bamboo works, the raw materials being found in plentitude in the

valley. In the domain of Sericulture and in weaving cotton, *pat*, *muga* and *endi* cloths in particular Assam has her world wide reputation, and the valley has been contributing a lot to the economic prosperity of the people, which, under Government patronage, would make further advancement. These, together with the forest resources, consisting of valued timbers like sal, gomari, cham, poma, simalu and *agaru* in the main, used for varied purposes, have, besides helping the people in many ways, added to the State revenue. To this is to be added the Elephants for ivory, which, along with the skin and horns of the much prized Rhino of the Kaziranga Game Sanctuary and other places, have been contributing to the augmentation of the national wealth of the country by earning foreign exchange.

The net-work of communications through the Brahmaputra, the Railways and the roads, which has been serving the cause of trade and commerce, and the articles of trade, are expected to depict a picture of the Agro-Industrial life of the people. Prior to the coming of the British, the chief means of communications were by the Brahmaputra and its large tributaries and by a few roads, built by the Ahom and Koch rulers. The necessity of carrying tea, oil, coal and timber in the main accelerated the process in the development of the Steamer and Railway services. Steamer services in the river Brahmaputra were started in 1848 between Guwahati and Calcutta, which were later on extended to Dibrugarh. The R. S. N. Company started operation of the steamer services from 1860 and in 1884 daily services operated between Dhubri and Dibrugarh, connecting these with a steamer service from Dhubri to Jatrapur. A direct Steamer service between Dibrugarh and Calcutta was also opened. Since then the services for carrying both goods and passengers went on regularly. But, with the partition of the country and the creation of East Pakistan, Steamer services have received a great set-back. The Inland Water transport service, operating within the valley, has been serving but a limited purpose at present.

The Railway services were opened, we have noted, with a view to connecting the tea-gardens, the oil and the coal-fields

with the Brahmaputra Steamer Service. Between 1881 and 1885 the Assam Railway and Trading Company connected the said centres by rail lines by constructing the Dibru-Sadiya, Dibrugarh-Jaipur, Titabar-Mariani, Tezpur-Balipara and other important lines. After the formation of the A. B. R. in 1892 steps were taken to connect Assam with the rest of the country. Guwahati-Jamunamukh line was opened in 1897. In 1904 Dibrugarh was connected with Chittagong, and in 1902 the EBR line was extended from Calcutta to Dhubri and then to Amingaon in 1909-10. Further improvement in the subsequent years has been made, both by opening new lines and extending the existing ones. But, there is still scope for its expansion, keeping in view the economic backwardness of the region. New problems have cropped up in the wake of the partition of the country, and Assam is now connected with the rest of the country by a narrow strip of land via Siliguri. Extension of the Broad Gauge line to Dibrugarh, improvement of the national highway and construction of more bridges over the Brahmaputra at suitable points are some of the concrete steps which the Union Government should take up immediately to remove the transport bottle-neck and to allow transportation of the national wealth of the country from one end to the other. Hydro-electric power generation project with the help of the river system, particularly the Brahmaputra, is another benevolent measure that may be taken up at the national level for the agricultural and industrial development of the region.

The trade centres and the river ports like Dhubri-Jogighopa, Goalpara, Pandu, Guwahati, Tezpur, Kokilamukh, Dibrugarh and Saikhoaghat-Saidya have been helping in the commercial enterprises of the valley, linking these places with some important places of the country. During the Ahom period trade relations were conducted through military-cum-commercial establishments at Sadiya, Marangi, Kajali, Raha and Jagiroad in the heart of the valley and the custom houses at Bijini, Chapaguri, Charduar, Kariapar and Simalia; Assam-Bhutan and Assam-Tibet relations were held through the last two duars. About the year 1820 the Lhasa merchants are

said to have brought with them Rs. 70,000 to buy commodities from Assam, and the merchants from the latter place carried rice, coarse silk, iron, lac, buffalo horn, pearls, corals, etc. The imported goods consisted of woollen, gold-dust, rocksalt, Tibetan cowries, Chinese silk, musk, ivory, copper pots, etc. The value of this trade amounted annually to two lakhs of rupees, as it stood in 1809.

It was through Hadira-Kandahar Chouki that large scale trade transactions were carried on between Assam and Bengal, where foreign merchants established their permanent stations. The other important centre was Goalpara. Foreign merchants paid a good sum of Rs. 90,000 as custom duties to the Ahom ruler Gaurinath Sinha. In 1809 Assam had to pay Rs. 2,28300 to Bengal and Bengal Rs. 1,30900 to Assam, and the entire trade amounted to Rs. 3,59200. Export articles consisted chiefly of lac, muga, silk and cloth, manjit, black pepper, long pepper, cotton with seeds, ivory, bell metal utensils, mustard seeds, iron hoes, etc., and the import-salt, ghee, pulses, sugar, stone beads, woollen, coral, jewels, pearls, cutlery, spices, copper, paints, shells, muslin, etc. Hadira trade house was closed by the British in 1835. In the previous year the import was valued at Rs. 2,50000 and export Rs. 3,00000. The volume of trade therefore gives us an idea about the indigenous products of the valley, which has been one of the very resourceful regions, in respect of mineral wealth and cottage industrial products, in the entire country.

Social Life : Progressive out-look :

Along with the material progress, made by the people of the valley, through the special efforts and patronage of the Ahom and post-Ahom rulers, steps were taken for their advancement in the sphere of socio-religious life and in the spread of education. Under the patronage of the Koch-Kachari-Ahom rulers, the people in general, with broad social outlook produced volumes of literary treasures in both Assamese and Sanskrit, bearing on varied subjects, which stand unrivalled even today. Though centuries of evolution,

and nurtured by natural environment, Assamese language emerged as the common vehicle of expression of the people of the valley and of the adjoining hills and served as the *lingua franca* of the entire north-eastern region for all practical purposes.

With the establishment of public schools and colleges under the British in modern times, the inhabitants came into contact with the western system of education. Even so, the pre-British literary treasures of Assam even to-day hold the ground in respect of both the number of volumes and in quality and comparatively speaking, their authors were more erudite and sublime than their modern counterparts.

The birth of neo-Vaisnavism in the soil of the valley, propagated by its preachers like Srimanta Sankaradeva, Mahapurusa Madhavadeva and their disciples through the instrumentality of scriptures like the *Kirtana*, *Namaghosa*, *Baragita*, *Ankiya-natas*, etc. based mainly on Indian philosophy, the *Gita*, the *Bhagavata* and the *Upanisads*, and the establishment of *satras* like those of Bardowa, Kamalabari, Barpeta, Patbousi, Sundaridia and others, including Madhupur in Koch Bihar, holding contact with Puri-Brindavana, during the 15th-16th century A.D., which embraced all ethnic groups, including the Muslims under the fold of one god-head, created all favourable conditions for binding the people of the entire North-Eastern region of the country into one spiritual entity. To this was added during the 18th century the most popular Indian faith of Saktism under the patronage of the Ahom rulers like Siva Sinha, who built temples and devalayas throughout the valley, particularly in the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang and Sibsagar, for the maintenance of which lavish grants of land were made. The temple of Kamakhya on the Nilacala, the embodiment of *dasamahavidya*, *Navadurga* and *Dvadasakali*, near Guwahati, built under the patronage of a succession of rulers, belonging to different ruling families like the Koch and the Ahom, has been standing as a living momento of the greatness of the said rulers, and as a noted centre of Hindu pilgrimage.

The remains of architecture, sculptures and icons found

throughout the valley, chiefly at Sadiya, Tezpur, Bisvanath, Numaligarh, in the districts of Goalpara and Nowgong and in and around Guwahati, the dilapidated Royal palaces at Garhgaon and Rangpur (Sibsagar town) and the standing temples of Sibsagar and Jaisagar, to mention a few, raised by the artists and architects from the north-eastern region of India, speak of the glorious days of the inhabitants of the place and of their intimate cultural link with the people of the other regions of India and of South-east Asia.

Contributions to Indian Culture :

Through the creation of a broad, liberal society, devoid of untouchability, based on humanism of the Vaisnava preachers, the practical enunciation of the principles of the Tantrik tenet with the help of texts and raising of temples, dedicated to Siva and Sakti, production of treatises bearing on Ayurveda, Jyotisa and Smrti in the main, and through the prodigious specimens of fine arts including painting, as illustrated by the *Hastividya* (published) ; *Dharmapurana*, *Sankhacudavadhakavya*, *Gitagovinda* and *Ananda-lahari*, all composed in Assam during the 18th century the people of the valley have richly contributed to the composite culture of India. Not a meagre contribution has this part of the country made to the noble cause of its liberation from the yoke of the foreigners, in which the same spirit of valour and patriotism, as well as unity of purpose have been demonstrated by its people, as they did in repelling Muslim invasions on a number of occasions. This made the valley, nay the entire north-eastern region, remain independent till 1826, when the rest of the country passed into the hands of the British. "Nothing perhaps better explains this independent character of Assam history than an appeal to her geography, and none can draw a true picture of the Assamese and their aesthetic sense in particular, without due emphasis on the surroundings in which they live . . . The location of the land in proximity to Pakistan (Bangladesh), China, Tibet and Burma will ever make it a factor of great importance in international politics.

Let more and more attention be paid to the advancement of the valley, the gateway to the eastern-most part of India, and let the multipurpose projects under the Corporations and Undertakings, taken up at the National and State levels, be of help in fostering the noble cause of *National Integration*, to be brought about only with the real progress, moral and material, made by its humble motley of citizens like their counterparts of the sister States of the Union of India.

THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF ASSAM THROUGH THE AGES

Dr. Nagen Saikia

The History of the social life of Assam is one of change and growth. It could be divided into three periods, namely, the early period till the 12th century, the medieval period till the 18th century, and the modern period till the present time.

If one attempts to talk of the social history, one must put the changed historical map of the land under scrutiny, and also a comprehensive picture of the social life of the people of the land before the eyes of one's mind. The physical and qualitative changes and growths that take place in the flowing "Time" of a given land and its people, go on recording the social history of the people of the land. The social history is also the history of human civilization and culture.

With the historical changes of the map of a land, the history of its political rise and fall as well as the changes brought about by even nature also get related. Such changes also influence the civilization and the culture of the society. So, natural history and geo-political history form integral part of the social history.

A country or any geo-political region is not just a lifeless map in the atlas ; a country means the people in it. Man creates a country for his real needs, and with the abstract idea of a country, man's emotions get involved. Then one dedicates oneself for one's country out of a patriotic sense of duty. People who make a nation do not grow out of the soil like plants. The men multiply themselves through biological and cultural contacts with others.

In reality man and men's civilization and culture are by their very nature hybrids. As the geographical map of a country changes with the political and natural changes, similarly with the intermixture of the different ethnic and linguistic groups, the human species also undergo various changes, and the languages develop out of this admixture. Social history points out the components of intermixture, of change and of growth, specify its different stages of development and tries to find out the productive processes which have contributed to such growth and changes that we note in society. Social history tells us about the part which lies behind the present or we can say that it tells us about the foundation that lies below a house. From the historical light of the past, we can find our way to the future. But one must not fall in love with the past or try to return to the past out of a sentimental reason.

If we want to discuss the social history of Assam, the question would at once arise as to what specific period we have in mind. Is it the present day Assam, or the Assam mentioned in Jogini Tantra as '*Karatoyang Samarabhya Jabaddikkara Basini*' which were the boundaries of ancient Kamrupa, of the Assam mentioned by Sugrib in the Ramayana as the beautiful Pragjyotishpura of '*Dustatma Narako Nama Danabah*,' or the eastern kingdom beyond Varanasi as referred to in *Kavya Mimamsa*, or Assam as described in the Allahabad rock-inscription of Samudra Gupta which dates back to 3rd or the 5th century A.D. We may have in mind also the Ahoms who ruled Assam by uniting the different kingdoms into one, or we should take into account the Assam under the British rule. If we want to talk of social history, we have to keep in mind the changing political maps of Assam through the course of its history. In fact, the history of the land spreading out from Dikrai to Kortowa (present day Tista), the land which stretches towards the north-east from the Bay of Bengal, is in reality, the ancient history of Assam. Almost a thousand years before the birth of Christ, North Bengal was a part of Pragjyotishpura and a large stretch of Southern Bengal formed a part of the Bay of Bengal. In this context, it is worthwhile to note what Paresh Chandra Bandopadhyaya has said in '*Bangalar Purabrittva*' that 24 Parganas, Khulna, Jessore, Nadia, Faridpur, Bakarganj and Dhaka, Noakhali, some areas of Tripura formed a

part of the sea. That may have been the reason for there are no ancient references to these kingdoms which grew up by the side of the sea whereas there are many references to the ancient and mighty kingdom of Pragjyotishpura.

The history of the four dynasties—Naraka Bhouma, Varmana, Salastambha and Pala, which ruled over this ancient kingdom of Pragjyotishpura, by the side of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries surrounded by hills and mountains from the 1st to 12th century proves that they inherited a rich language and culture. From the Umachal inscription script dating back to the fifth century, A.D. to the 'Gashtal inscription', the ancient Copper edicts in Sanskrit and the Stone edicts, all bear witness to different scripts that were used, and to the prevalence of the Sanskrit language. The ancient remains of 'Bamuni Pahar', the stone images and stone works scattered all over the state indicate that a main art-form of ancient India had certainly come to the land of Pragjyotishpura and its adjoining areas. The names of the kings give an indication of the their cultural heritage. The available documentary evidences, which have survived till now, cannot naturally tell us all about that past history. We will have to fill in the gaps to get a clear picture of the history of ancient Assam. This brings to us two probabilities. First, at the time of King Bhaskar Verma, as is evident from what Huen Tsang has written, the extent of the kingdom of Kamrupa was one thousand lee, that is it was seventeen hundred miles and it encompassed not only the Brahmaputra and Surma Valley but also parts of North Bengal and Bhutan. The second, that the Aryans has settled in this land from ancient times and that Aryan language and culture constituted the main stream of the Assamese language and culture.

Many people have an aversion to the term Aryan these days. The Aryans are not considered by a section of people now a days to be the sons of the soil. But non-partisan and objective reading of history leads to a different conclusion. It is important to realise that the term 'Aryan' does not refer to any ethnic group; this term refers to those speaking the Aryan language. In that sense those speaking the Indo-Aryan language are a part of the wider Aryan circle though ethnically they may belong to Mongoloid or of Caucasian stock. When we consider the social history of Assam,

we must keep this aspect in mind. It is important to note that the Aryan speaking Nordic, Caucasian or Alpines entered India in the ancient Stone age, New Stone age or after the Iron age, and though they spoke the language derived from the same stock, the differences in their way of life gradually separated them from each other. In that age the term Aryan did not stand for being civilized or cultured ; but was used to denote those who spoke the Aryan language. It is worthwhile to remember that when the Aryans came, they were in the first stage of human civilization ; they had only known the use of fire. But by that time, India had already passed through the stages of use of fire and agriculture and reached the third stage of urban civilization. Therefore, the non-Aryans living in India then, were more civilized than the migrant Aryans. But the homeless warriors, the mighty Aryans had an advantage over others is that they already had a rich language. As they had been moving from one place to another, their language had acquired a rich vocabulary and was very expressive in its use of words. Through their physical power and through their powerful language, the Aryans established themselves as powerful group in India and made its culture and its civilization their own. Though they had a rich language they had no script. At that time in the Indus civilization in India, a script was already being used. It is a significant milestone in the history of Indian scripts. Not only that, they also married from non-Aryan tribes and thereby laid the foundations of a new society. It is likely that even the second generation of Aryans were the children of the non-Aryan mothers. They adopted the non-Aryan Gods and Goddesses as their own, and learnt the method of constructing temples, adopted the alien ways of worship and made it their own. So what we today term as Aryan had been actually borrowed from non-Aryan sources. It is worth remembering that one of the four Vedas of the Aryans, namely 'Atharva Veda' is completely derived from folk wisdom, belief, ceremonies and rituals. Indian culture and civilization was a synthesis of the Aryan and non-Aryan civilization and culture. A stream of that culture was brought to Assam by Aryan speaking Alpine forces in the 4th century B. C. The seeds of Assamese language and culture were lying dormant in that stream which Alpine warriors brought with them. The society which secured this

seed at that time in this country was a society of non-Aryan people. But that non-Aryan or pre-Aryan society did not have many of the social groups which we find in present day Assam. Cultural anthropology confirms this view. On the other hand, many other social groups came to Assam many centuries after the Alpine forces had come. Moreover, the social groups which had come later like those who happened to come earlier enriched the stream that embodied and carried forward the Aryan language and in fact, recreated it according to their own needs. This was an inevitable socio-historical reaction to a particular situation. As the Aryans who had migrated to India, mixed with the local population, similarly such a synthesis encompassing all aspects of life including the biological, linguistic and cultural, started in Assam also from post-Vedic times. The small Alpine group mixed similarly with the other social groups in Assam and broadened and gave new dimension to the social and cultural life of the country. It opened up new possibilities for the future. Our social and cultural life has developed stage by stage through process of repeated synthesis of the various races and peoples of different origins. We cannot deny those stages of development today, nor can we remove any of the components of those ingredients which formed and brought about such a socio-cultural synthesis.

We have noted that the boundaries of ancient Assam were expanded or reduced in different periods depending on political rise and fall of the time. From Kumar Bhaskar Verman's Nidhanpur edicts till the 'Kanaiboroshibowa' rock edicts of the 12th century, A.D. the graphical map of ancient Kamrup was that of an extensive kingdom. In the 13th century, before the coming of Sukafa the extensive kingdom of Bhaskar Verman got reduced. Later, in the extensive kingdom from Parasuramkunda in the east and to Bhutan in the west, the areas which are under present Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Srikhatta, Khasi and Jaintia, and certain parts of Garo Hills did not remain as parts of it. When 'Sukafa' established his capital in Charaideo, the Brahmaputra valley was divided into the kingdoms of Chutia, Bhuyan, Kachari and Kamatapur. But the language which was prevalent in all these four kingdoms was the same throughout. Till this time we do not have any evidence of the

existence of any other language. In the surrounding areas also we do not know of the prevalence of any other language. Hiuen Tsang came in touch with this language when he came to Kamrup and he said about this language that it slightly differed from the language of Central India. The comment is indicative of the fact that this branch of Indo-European language incorporated within itself influences from Tibeto-Burmese groups of languages and therefore this language was naturally different from the language of Central India. From the royal edicts written in Sanskrit it becomes clear that this language of the Prakrit stage which developed in ancient Kamrup bore the distinguishing marks of local influences in its Grammar and orthography. At the time of the coming of the Ahoms, the Brahmaputra valley was divided into four kingdoms. But the language spoken in all the kingdoms was the same, which prove that in different historical periods though different groups of people came to the Brahmaputra valley, they came within the same linguistic and cultural orbit. The Ahom rulers adopted this language first as their official language and soon made it their mother tongue. All evidence points to the fact that there was at that time no language more expressive than this in the Brahmaputra valley and that this language was prevalent among all the different social groups of Assam. There is scope for extensive discussion as to how this language came to be accepted as the common language. But before that we must consider the different social segments whose common language it became, as well as the ethnic and linguistic identity of those segments of the population and the way in which they came to adopt a language from Indo-Aryan sources. Though modern definition of nationality do not take ethnic origin into account, still we have to see how different ethnic groups merged for synthetic development of the Assamese Society.

Anthropologists have divided human society into four groups : Caucasus or Nordic, Mongoloid, Negrito and Austroloid. Austroloids are described by some as neo-Caucasus, some as Pre-Dravidian, some have termed them as 'Nishad'. Dr. Birajashankar Guha has divided India's ethnic groups into six major divisions, i.e. Negrito, Neo-Australoid, Mongoloid, Mediterranean, Western-large-headed and Nordic. He commented that as there has been a lot

of admixture among the various ethnic groups, it is difficult to separate one from the other. Investigations as to who were the original inhabitants of India among these various ethnic groups are still going on. Some scholars claim that Dravidian, some others Negritos and yet another group of scholars claim that *Austroloids* are the original inhabitants of India. But the latest research has proved that the *Australoids* most likely are the original inhabitants. The skeletons found in different areas also prove this.

Austroloids were dark-skinned, of small height, flat nosed, long head, thick mustaches, red eyes and their hair of copper colour. The 'Nishad's described in Bhagavata Purana are of Austroloids ethnic stock. The human skeletons found in the Indus valley (3500 B.C.) and the collections from other sites have gone on to prove that those 'Nishada's were the most ancient ethnic group in India. These *Austroloids* came to north-east India and settled here. These hunting ethnic-tribes later took to agriculture. The *Austroloids* were Austro-speaking people and linguistically they got divided into Austro-Asiatic and Austronesia. Austro-Asiatic language spread to Indo-China, Burma and India ; and the other branch of the language got divided into three branches—namely Indonesian, Melanesian and Polynesian.

In Assam there are no descendants of the Austries. But scholars have noted the features and tendencies of the Austries in the various communities. Among the ethnic groups in Assam one notes the prevalence of the long head and the wide flat nose. From this we can surmise that Austries had lived in Assam in ancient time. Moreover, Austro stream of languages survived in Assam among the Khasis—though ethnically the Khasis are of Mongoloid stock. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyaya has pointed to the existence of Austries in Assam before the Mongoloid Khasis. Dr. Bhuban Mohan Das, after the study of Garos, Rabhas and Kacharis of Assam have found in them parts of the features of non-Mongoloid races, particularly of Caucasus and Australoid ethnic groups. He found Austroliogenetic features in ethnic groups residing in Assam, North Bengal and parts of Nepal. In Nagaland and Chittagong areas also Australoid features have been discovered by the scholars. In the present day tea garden labourers of Assam particularly among the Kol, Munda, Gond, Ho and such other

groups, Austic features can be clearly observed. Ethnically Mongoloid, the Karbis have also similar linguistic and cultural features because of their social relationship with the neighbouring Khasis. Whatever that may be, anthropological study and the evidences found till now, have established that Austics are the most ancient ethnic group in Assam.

Scholars have shown that after Austics, Dravidians and Negritos had been in existence in India. Guha, Hutton and others place the Dravidians as the first inhabitants of India, whereas scholars such as R.D. Banerjee gives that place of honour to the Negritos. In Assam we do not find Negrito features. But in some ethnic groups of Nagaland Negrito features have been noted by the Anthropologists. After the Australoids the ones coming from the Mediterranean ocean are the ancestors of the Dravidians. These people built up an ancient civilization in India before the Aryans. Indo-Dravidians were not confined to the South-West of India but spread to other parts as well. Long head, long face, the nose not so pointed and neither flat, medium height, black hair, Yellow skinned—the ancestors of these people lived towards the east of the Mediterranean and were a kind of Caucasus.

This ethnic group might have migrated to Assam after the Austics. According to Kanaklal Barua, Pragyothispura was the kingdom of people coming from the Mediterranean sea. These Mediterraneans were defeated by the Mongoloids and later the king of Videha of Indo-Dravidian sources helped Narakasura to regain his kingdom. The king of Videha is said to have brought up Naraka and this relates a Naraka's origin to Indo-Dravidian ethnicity. Whatever may be the authenticity of this episode, scholars have discovered Indo-Dravidian features even among the present population of Assam and that points to their ancient origins in the State. It is worthwhile to remember that Mediterraneans and the Alpines had come to Assam even before the time of Naraka which is 1st or 2nd century A.D. It has not so far been possible to determine the exact time of the coming of the Mediterraneans into Assam.

The Mongoloid features are commonly evident in the population of Assam and the North-East, and that points to a large

influx of Mongoloids into this area. But when did these Mongoloids come?

It is a fact that different hordes of Mongoloids ethnic groups had entered this area at different historical periods from the North, North-east, and the South. If Narakasura had to defeat the Mongoloids to occupy Pragjyotishpura then soon after the streams of Alpines and the Mediterraneans entered into Assam. So if we suppose that the first Mongoloid stream of people came in Narakasura's time, it must have been in the first or second century A.D. that they entered into Assam. The army that king Bhagadutta took to Kurukshetra consisted of 'Kirata' and Chinese people and the colour of their skin was golden. In different contexts there are references to these Kiratas in Atharva Veda, Yayur Veda, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vishnu Purana and Markandeya Purana and in some other ancient Sanskrit Texts. Golden coloured, slanted and narrow eyes—that these are people of Mongoloid origin there can be no two opinions on it.

The different clans of these Mongoloid people though of same origin had their own languages, distinct from one another. Their languages with limited vocabulary could best be called dialects. Their languages were different from Indo-Aryan languages. The source being Chino-Tibetan group of languages these groups of languages have two branches—'Siam-Chinese' and 'Tibeto-Burmese'. Most of the tribal languages in Assam originated from the Tibeto-Burmese branch of this group of languages. Just as the different languages of North India are different from one another, though they are all derived from the same source of Indo-Aryan group of language, the languages derived from the Tibeto-Burmese group of languages are also different from each other. One common distinguishing feature of these languages is that in many cases the slightest phonetic change alters the meaning of words. Even the same phonetic sound with the slightest variation in intonation may change the meaning totally. Unless one knows the Phonetic grammar of each language, one cannot master the language. Assamese words have also accepted the phonetic pattern of some of these words. One distinguishing feature of Indo-Aryan groups of languages is that for a different meaning a separate word is used. Moreover, Sanskrit language is more resourceful and

expressive than other languages. To express a new meaning or to give a new definition words can be altered by addition or deletion or by synthesis to create a totally new word ; this is the peculiar power of the Sanskrit language. This could have been the main reason for the spread of the Assamese language in ancient Assam rather than the Tibeto-Burmese group of languages. The same could be said about the other branches of Tibeto-Burmese languages, that is, the languages which originated from the Siam-Chinese branch. Another deficiency of Tibeto-Burmese languages is that they lack a script to express different phonetic sounds of various lengths. It is not possible to devise a script among some of the linguistic groups in our State. There is a story that they had once a script but certain animals devoured it.

The different Tibeto-Burmese speaking Mongoloid groups who came to this area at different times, gradually lost contact with their own languages because they did not use it and came to adopt the ancient 'Assamese' language as their own. When they adopted the Assamese language they also brought some words, some expressions and affixes with them to the new language. Dr. Kakati and some other scholars have discussed this matter in detail. With the elements of the Tibeto-Burmese groups, the languages developed with certain variations from the other Indo-Aryan languages of Central India to what became the Assamese language.

It became clear that the tributaries coming out of the Indo-Aryan language's main stream got enriched with the waters of the different streams and tributaries of the languages of different origin such as the Tibeto-Burmese. In course of time, it became the mother tongue of all the people gathered in the Brahmaputra valley such as Aryans, Dravidians and of people of Mongoloid origin. So it would be grossly incorrect to say that the Assamese language was brought to Assam by some so-called Aryan families. On the contrary, it is a language which the people of the area have evolved themselves for their own particular use. From the point of time also the main stream of this language flowed into Assam before the languages of the Tibeto-Burmese origin entranced. Dr. Sunitikumar Chattopadhyaya has shown that the Sanskrit language originated from the synthesis of the Aryan language with that of Austric and Dravidian languages. Because the people speaking the

Chino-Tibetan group of languages were confined to the North-East, it was not possible for them to come into contact with the Sanskrit language. But in ancient Assam they moulded the earlier form of the Assamese language according to their own needs as they came in touch with it. But this ancient Assamese Language had originated from Sanskrit. Among the Assamese speaking language of a particular community. In this way the common language that emerged played a crucial role in the creation of the social history of Assam.

To know about the identity of the Assamese people, we tried to trace the history of the main ethnic groups in Assam. We have also come to know that the different branches of the main ethnic groups, coming to Assam at different periods, passed through a process of synthesis towards forming a common limited social life of ancient Assam. Synthesis took place in blood, in language and in culture.

To put it in a nut-shell—from Tibeto-Burmese branch of the Mongoloids in Assam emerged the Bodo group, though now even this original Bodo group has got sub-divided into separate linguistic groups such as Garo, Tiwa, Rabha, Chutia, Koch, Kochari, Dimas and Karbi. From the Tai-Chinese branch of the Mongoloid section emerged the communities like Tai-Khamtis, Tai-Fakey, Tai-Syam, Tai-Turung, Tai-Aiton and Tai-Ahom. From the Assamese-Burmese sub-group Naga and Kukichin emerged Aao, Lotha, Kuki, Manipuri and such other groups. Assamese population has been enriched by the broad conglomeration of the 'Bodo group of people' which was an off-shoot of the Assam-Burma branch of the Mongoloid ethnic stream and also by the people of the Tai-Chinese branches of the Mongoloid ethnic stream. What we understand by the Assamese people today is a composite picture of Austric, Aryan, Dravidian and Mongoloid people. This picture has emerged through the course of thousands of years of history. As the scholars have shown, even among the Brahmins of Assam, who may claim to be genetically of pure stock there has been nearly sixtyfive percent admixture with non-

Aryan ethnic groups. So there must have been marriages or physical intimacy outside marriage for such a thing to have happened. McCosh in his 'Topography of Assam' (1837) said that "In Assam no one really bothered to keep up upper-caste status, as a result of which there is greater goodwill among the people here than in people of other parts of India". He thought that the large number of population of this country originated from the different hill tribes surrounding the country. According to him "Indeed these tribes form so large a share of the population that it is not easy to distinguish the pure Assamese amongst them, and the distinction is rendered still more obscure by inter-marriages with some of the hill tribes". This writing of 19th century has clearly shown that the Mongoloid group of people forms a dominant part of the Assamese population. In the 'Yogini Tantra' of the 14th century also it has been said that 'Kirata' influence is immensely found here which points to the influence of 'Kirata' features among the Assamese population. The study of Assamese folk culture would give many instances of such influences. Many of the rituals and ceremonies which Assamese people observe from their birth to their death would give plenty of evidences of such influences. The use of bamboo, weaving which was prevalent universally amongst Assamese women, irrespective of caste, the habit of fishing among the population in Assam, the way of constructing houses, the laxity of the caste system—all these point to the composite nature of Assamese culture which has come about through a process of synthesis.

Their agricultural methods, the independent way of their life irrespective of class or tribe to which they belong, their common habits, their food-habits, their use of bamboo and cane—all these point to their common features which distinguish them from others. One can point to the three-piece dress which Assamese women wear and which distinguish them from others. For the convenience of hill women the lower clothing (*Mekhela*) is not stitched and the upper shawl is tied to the body tightly whereas in the plains the lower pieces of clothing is stitched and the shawl is lightly wrapped around the body. But every woman wear a three piece clothing. The study of our folk-culture leads us to the clear conclusion that this is a rare example of a commonness. If we

look to the folk life and to the folk culture of Assam, we find many examples of unity in diversity among the people. These folk achievements of synthesis can also be observed in many of the stories of folk literature—the same story with the slightest variations have become a part of the oral culture of both the plains and the hills. However, folk literature, particularly folk stories, their aim, purpose and the narrative method fall into a common pattern throughout the world—there are only superficial regional variations.

If we look to the folk culture of the Assamese people—their religious rituals and behaviour—we can broadly categorise them into two. One is common folk belief in ghosts, fairies and certain demons and the other is to follow certain laid down religious rituals. Dr. Banikanta Kakati in his book on the ancient religion of Kamarup and Dr. Maheswar Neog in his book on ancient Assamese society and culture have shown that Siva and Shakti were prevalent in different forms. With some of these forms the beliefs of primitive man and Tantric rituals also got associated. The Siva and Shakti worships were based on primitive rituals before they were brought under Aryan influence. This form was mainly of 'Kirata' influence. On the other hand, Buddhist belief and later Tantric rituals also got their place among segments of the population. In the later period the migration of various groups of Tai-Buddhist people gave a new dimension to these beliefs. Though there is no question of their relationship to earlier forms of Buddhist beliefs such as that of 'Bajragan' or 'Sahaigan,' many suggest their relationship with the 'Kalita' caste which entered this region before the birth of Christ.

These things go on to prove that Shaiva, Shakti and Buddhist religions were prevalent among many ethnic groups in Assam and these religions also assimilated many of the beliefs of these people. There was also a stream of Vaishnava religion even from the age of Tamra edicts. In 'Harsha-Charit' Bhaskar Verma has been described as "of Vaishnava Lineage" in Bargonga inscription. Bhaskar Verma's ancestor Bhuti verma has been described as 'great Vaishnavite'. In 'Pushpabhadra lipi' Vishnu in his incarnation as the boar has been worshipped. In Kamrup's different Tamra edicts the references of Nanda-Yashoda, Basudev-Daivaki, Narasimha,

Baraha etc. are mentioned. The references of such names point to the running stream of the Vaishnavite religious tradition. Dr. Negro has pointed out the significance of the names of the Brahmins who received land gifts. Their names such as Keshava, Janardana, Madhava, Samkarshan, Madhusudana and such other names tell their own story. Contemporary sculpture and archeological remains also prove that Vaishnavism was a powerful presence in ancient Assam. It is seen that a few centuries before the birth of Christ (Naraka's birth-story is important) a main off-shoot of Vaishnavism was a dominant force in ancient Kamrupa. This religion was the precursor of the religion based on the teachings of the Bhagavata. It naturally differed in form from the religion preached by Sri Sankaradeva. Even then the inner core of both these forms of Vaishnavism was the same.

Religious ways of ancient India and its different modes entwined with roles of primitive religion in local forms were in practice till the time of Sankaradeva. We have to take into account these local forms of worship in ancient Assam for proper study of the ancient social life and history.

Another aspect of 'Kirata' influence is seen in the use of Bodo words in the names of many rivers and places in Upper Assam.

Dr. Herambakanta Borpuzari has surmised that a powerful royal family like that of Vermana might have lost its influence because of the influx of a huge ethnic group with a powerful force of their own. This could be a powerful segment of the Bodo group of people.

This Bodo ethnic group might have gradually spread out to as far as Sadia and another branch of this group of people might have later gone to Cachar through Dimapur in the south. These people gave a new dimension to the Assamese language, culture and to the Assamese nationality itself. Mainly the syntax of the Assamese sentence in its construction and the changes in the words that denotes relationship are their unique contributions to the language. Anderson had noted in his book 'Kachari Folktales and Rhymes' that such similarity between the two languages—Assamese and Bodo can not be found anywhere else in the world. Those who built up this language and culture leading to formation of the

Assamese nationality were to be later shown as Borahi, Moran, Chutia, Koch, Kochari, Deuri etc.

The thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries are significant milestones in the social history of Assam. In the thirteenth century 'Sukafa' came to Assam and the fifteenth century saw the birth of Sri Sankaradeva. With the coming of 'Sukafa' the middle ages began in Assam. Moreover, the name with which this State and its people came to be known must have taken birth in the thirteenth century itself. Dr. Chattopadhyaya in his book 'Kirata Janakriti' while discussing the coming of the Ahoms to Assam has said, "They were the Assams, Ahoms (Ahoms) the people who gave their name to the province". In Dr. Banikanta Kakoti memorial lecture he mentions that the word 'Ahom' became Asam as the word was pronounced that way by the old residents of Assam. Some others have related the word Asom to 'Shyam', some others with 'Ha-Shayam'. And others have related the word with 'Na-Sama' which means uneven. Whatever may be the definition, it has now been universally accepted that this word is another version of the word 'Ahom'.

In the first stages, the word 'Asom', 'Ahom', referred to a particular community. In the 'Darrang Raj Bangsawali' written in the 16/17th century and in the 'Katha Gurucharit' the word has been referred to in this sense. So the use of the name 'Asam' to denote a country and to refer to its people as 'Asamiya' is not of very ancient origin. The Ahom State stood for the State of Asam and the population of this state is 'Asamiya'—these were the meanings of these two terms. There is no reference to the caste Hindus in these terms. The language which was moulded by the people of this State, to which I have referred to earlier, received the patronage of Koch, Kochari, Ahom and Chutia kings and such patronage made the language richer. Under the patronage of these kings—'Ramayana' by Kandali, the writings of Harihara Vipra and Rudra Kandali, the writings of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, the histories of the Ahoms, 'Hasti-puthi' and 'Ananda Lahari' and such other illustrated texts were written.

In the meanwhile, those who came as a part of the Mughal forces—those Muslim soldiers, a section of them became a part and parcel of the Assamese society during the Ahom period of Assam's

history. Inter-marriages and adoption of the ways of the local population were the main channels through which migrants integrated with the local population. Koch and Ahom kings brought in from outside new families of Brahmins, Kayasthas and other people following different professions and placed them in positions of responsibility. These migrants through inter-marriages and socio-cultural contacts became part of the Assamese society. On the other hand, another process took place in Assam during the Vaishnavite era, which was/is not practiced anywhere else in India. Through the intervention of the Vaishnavite institutions, by coming in the fold of Vaishnavism, a process started whereby certain sub-nationalities entered the fold of the greater nationality of the Assamese people with a sense of pride. McCosh had commented on this phenomenon by merely looking at the structure and the social behaviour of Assamese society. Andre Kentli, a Professor of London University (1984) has now come to the same conclusion after a scientific study of the village life of Assam. Vaishnavite religion brought the so-called backward communities like 'Kirat, Kachari, Khasi, Garo, Miri, Javan, Kanka, Gowal', all under the orbit of the culture of Vaishnavism. Moreover, even those tribal communities, who were leading a primitive life of their own, were brought under the fold of Vaishnavism as they were also made followers of the Vaishnava Gurus. Many went up in the caste hierarchy and by becoming followers of the Vaishnava Gurus initially some of them came to be known as 'Koch' and then later as Kalita or Kayastha. Hiteswar Barbaruha has shown that the family tree of many distinguished families in Assam could be traced back to their tribal origins. He has given some clear examples to prove his thesis. Moreover, a whole group of people, as a whole could have taken themselves higher in the caste hierarchy and thereby transfer their social identity. Such transformation could have taken place on large scale and we cannot rule out the fact that even the Brahmins who claim to have come from Kanauj or Nawadip, those who boast that their ancestors were from outside Assam, were not of 'Kirata' origin from within the State itself. It is not that people had not migrate from outside even now. Till this century large segments of the population which had migrated from East Bengal, Bihar,

Madhya Pradesh, Nepal, Orissa and some other places have generally accepted the Assamese language and have become an intrinsic part of the social life of the State. This is the natural process through which in different ages the natural flow of migrants of different ethnic and linguistic group have migrated and through the process of synthesis formed the Assamese nation or 'Asamiya Jati'. Every progressive nationality, language and culture is of mixed origin and that is why it is above the narrow confines of any caste or tribe. The Assamese nationality today possesses such distinguishing features.

Till the twelfth century the social history of Assam is the history of the laying its foundations. The genetic intermingling of people of different ethnic groups, with the contributions of the Tibeto-Burmese linguistic groups the main stream of the language which originated from the Indo-Aryan group strengthened and the intermingling of different streams of folk cultures and religions made the significant trends of the history of Assam till the 12th century A.D. From the thirteenth till the 18th century through various political upheavals the modern political map of Assam took almost a stable shape. Assamese language and literature developed, Assamese society and culture took a new form and passing through different streams of religious faith it finally took to belief in one God. This belief on monism is a significant development of the history of middle ages. Most significant development of this era is that from lower strata in the social hierarchy through the institutional processes people could rise to other circles of life. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the pangs of the birth of modern Assam, coming into contact with western civilization and culture, and saw the emergence of a new consciousness in the Assamese mind. But the new consciousness brought along with it certain problems of their own. Thus, though this period could be described as the age of Assamese renaissance, it could also be rightly said that this period also brought with it the problems of the modern age.

The most towering personality of the middle ages in Assam is Sri Sankaradeva. He brought to Assam with the help of the Bhagavata, the final fruits of the Indian thoughts that was ushered in the Upanishadas. He also brought into Assam the classical art

forms and the requisite methods to practice them. On the other hand, he tried to combine both thoughts and art which he brought to his home State from outside Assam and also succeeded in harmonising the best in Indian thoughts and art forms with the best available traditions of the Assamese culture. Its sense of beauty, sense of humility, non-violence, patience, and liberalism and the realization of such other humane qualities are the outstanding achievements of Sankaradeva's times.

The two significant aspects of his contributions were the creation of a strong view against the professionalism and corruptions that made room in the Indian religions, and his successful attempt to make the best of the Indian tradition a part of the Assamese life. In the writings of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva we find not only the directives to face the contemporary problems but also the problems of universal relevance. "Vaishnavayan is not moved by consideration of castes" or "do not take into account the caste of either the Brahmin or the Chandala" or "consider all life to be as sacred as your own life." Through these messages on the one hand the caste system is being deplored and on the other hand such messages try to express the importance of self-awareness i.e. the 'atmabodha'.

In this period Assamese social life acquired certain other features; the 'Paik' system introduced by the Ahom kings, the bestowing of royal offices without consideration of caste, community or religion, the process of creation of a society composed of different types of professional people who were leading members of such a society etc. such measures strengthened not only the social fabric but also strengthened the economic and political life of the nation with which the social fabric is intrinsically linked. On the one hand the process initiated and accomplished by Vaishnavite culture to take under its orbit the people of all castes and creeds to unite them mentally and culturally, and on the other hand the process successfully initiated by Ahom rulers to create a bureaucracy drawn from various groups and different segments of society—these were the two most significant processes taking place in our society. 'Chandsai' and 'Bagh-Hazarika' are the creations of these two processes only. Even the Islamic preacher Ajan Pir, when he came to Assam to preach

the message of the Koran, adopted the form and the musical rhythms of Assamese Vaishnavite-poetry to convey his message. The orbit of Assamese life thus gained greater and wider dimensions.

The coming of British rule was a water-shed in the social history of our State. The socio-economic and political life which was torn to pieces by the invasion of the hordes of 'Mans' (Burmese invaders) got an immediate relief under the cover of the British imperial umbrella. Assam also got hatted in the octopus hold of imperialism. It entered into the dangerous cave of imperialism from which there was no easy exit. Moreover, Assamese people unfamiliar with British Administrative mechanism and their capitalist economy were found unsuitable to run the wheels of its exploitative imperialist economy. So the British rulers brought in administrative personnel from Bengal, and this in turn created social unhappiness and a sense of acute grievance; and such imposition of personnel from outside in every walk of life also posed a cultural threat to the fabric of Assamese social life. The replacement of the Assamese language by the Bengali language for all official and educational purposes and the arrival of the American Baptist missionaries—these are the significant events of that epoch. Of these events, the first one posed a cultural threat to the fabric of Assamese life and the last event, namely the work of the Baptist mission created for the first time a cultural awareness based on language. This was the initial result of the first contacts with western civilization and culture. The institutionalisation of education and the influence of western liberal humanism created a new group of people with a new consciousness. On the other hand, imperialistic economy impoverished and pauperised the common folk to such extent that they became deeply resentful of British rule and this resentment took the form of rebellion against British Rule. Western Education and civilization and the Bengal renaissance gave a totally new dimension to Assamese social and intellectual life. At the same time the fight to restore its rightful place to the Assamese language also implanted perhaps in the Assamese psyche a hatred for the Bengali people. In this way a love and hatred relation grew between the Assamese and the Bengalis. The development of

modern Assamese literature, the birth of new literary cultural and social institutions, the attempt to see the old world in a new way, through all these attempts a modern Assamese society was born. The creation of modern professional classes, and the changes in their habits, dresses, food, manner, building of houses gave a new look to the society. In short, it can be safely said that British rule completely transformed the history of our social life. To put it succinctly, after the rebellion of the 'Mowamarias' who hit at the very foundation of the monarchical system, economic imperialism removed feudalism and implanted itself on the soil of Assam. As a result the social history of Assam had also to transform itself consequently. The lackeys of capitalism and imperialism, the new business interests and professional classes who came to replace feudalism in Assam, became a new class in the social fabric of Assamese society.

Though the caste barriers in Assamese society were never rigid, in the times of the Ahom monarch 'Sargadeo-Sivasingha', Krishnaram Bhattacharya tried in a concerted way to accentuate the caste differences in Assamese society. The ancient rituals and customs of Hindu religious practices as prevailed in Assam were replaced by new ways of worship borrowed from Bengal known as '*Smarta mat*'. Pitambar Sidhanta Bidyabagish's opinion became the last word and the worship ways in Siva and Devi temples were changed and the icons of worship which were used till then were thrown in the river Brahmaputra. The division between upper caste and lower caste acquired a rigidity in the social fabric of Assam. Even then the caste differences in Assamese society could not become as intense as in the rest of India.

The advent of the British created the necessary environment for the modern Assamese to be conscious of the social evils of the society. People became particularly conscious of the evils of religious orthodoxy. Those who ushered in the new renaissance to our literature also took up to themselves the responsibility to ushering in a new era in our society. The personality of Lakshmi Nath Bezbaroa became the driving force of this intellectual revolution. It was felt that the short-comings in our language, literature, culture and society must be kept in mind and it also came to be very deeply accepted that these lacunae should be

removed. A new intellectual climate was created on the basis of deep patriotism, humanism, and a lofty idealism to bring about transformation in society.

It is seen that the social changes in society comes about with economic and political changes and the change of values and value systems. It can be said that the changes in the latter made change possible in the former. The social history of Assam bears testimony to this truth in every epoch of our history. From the advent of British power to its exit hundred and twenty years later, Assam passed through various socio-cultural changes without being fully conscious of them. The most important period it passed through was the period when cultural consciousness came in close touch with the new awakening of political consciousness. Though this awakening took place in the Indian national context, just as the other states of India joined the national movement keeping intact their particular distinguishing features, similarly Assam also joined the national movement without ceasing to be conscious of its particular national and cultural identity which distinguished it from others. Till around 1950's Assam was being guided by such ideals in mind.

After independence there has been rapid changes in the social life of our State. The political and economic demands have become intenser, education has spread most widely, science and technology have influenced not only our thinking and learning but have changed our life style, the distance between places have been bridged and people living far apart can also be in close touch with each other constantly. Because of all this, the social norms and values are changing rapidly. Many traditional folk cultures are disappearing because of the onslaught of changes in modern society. At times rapid changes have made people aimless. Traditional social norms and customs are in a state of decay and western values and customs are coming to be widely accepted. These are the processes through which social life is fast changing. The caste divisions are disappearing and everyone has come to a position to be able to demand for himself human and democratic rights.

Certain other events have taken place during this period effecting social life in some other ways. The migration of

population which took place after the partition of the country, a huge number of people from different States coming to this State to establish business, to work as government servants or as employees in some other jobs or as professional people, the corruptions which have come as misuse of political power—the sum total of all these influences has been to retard the process of social growth and integration in Assam. The Assamese nationality which took shape under a long historical process started to claim what was only its due, when various other forces to protect their own vested interests raised the bogey of Assamese identity to confuse the common people. When the Assamese people on the basis of their own state, language, culture and on the basis of claims for a regional economy, began to raise the questions relating to their rights as a nationality, the reactionary political forces encouraged division among the Assamese people. They tried to create division among the people on the question of nationality and sub-nationality, raised the communal bogey of Hindu or Muslim, tried to set workers against the farmers. A concerted attempt was being made to spread the feeling among different tribal linguistic groups that only they are the original inhabitants of Assam, that those who speak the Assamese tongue came after them to this State. Historical analysis has conclusively proved that these tribal groups who speak a particular tribal tongue today came comparatively on latter days than the Austric, Dravidian, and the first Mongoloid Bodo groups and their sub-ethnic groups. We have already discussed how by accepting and assimilating themselves into a common language these ethnic and linguistic groups built up a common sense of nationality—a common identity. We have already discussed how the circumferences of the political orbit of the Ahom kingdom and the cultural orbit of the neo-vaishnavite movement tied all ethnic groups to one nationality, namely the Assamese nationality. The minority linguistic groups who happened to remain outside any one of these two orbits—that is under the circumference of Ahom rule in the past or that of the new Vaishnavite movement, did not quite merge with the mainstream of the Assamese national consciousness but remained a little outside of it. These are also factors we have to take into account in studying the social history of Assam. Some of the

groups from within the category who did not quite merge earlier, by some natural course of history merged later with the national mainstream and adopted Assamese as their mother-tongue. Some social groups within the tea gardens and some groups of people in the riverine areas of Brahmaputra, are still passing through such stages of development whereby they will finally become an integral part of the Assamese society. In reality the process of the growth of a nationality is a continuing natural process in a society. It is the economic and social needs which keep up the process of ever flowing social changes. The political needs also contribute to this process of change and assimilation. But such social assimilation through constant change which unite people into one nationality receives a setback when narrow considerations and vested interests stand as obstacles in the way of assimilation.

Irrespective of the nationality or the sub-nationalities to which he may belong, all the Assamese speaking people desire and demand that the languages of the tribal Assamese people who speak a different tongue than Assamese should be protected and developed. Certain political forces are trying to break the link which the tribals linguistic groups have with the Assamese Language. It has been observed that in certain section of tribals a feeling has arisen that the Assamese language may stand in the way of the development of their language. If we examine this question, keeping in mind the socio-cultural history of Assam, such fears would appear to be unfounded. It is only natural that when after independence from among the tribal linguistic groups an educated middle class has come up, they would naturally try to establish their cultural identity. In the context of the growth of a tribal middle class, who speak a tongue other than Assamese, such a desire for their own identity is only to be expected. It is bound to happen. The Assamese-speaking majority has always been sympathetic to the cultural and linguistic aspirations of such tribal groups who are searching for their own identity. In such a situation it is the Assamese language which could contribute to the growth of the tribal languages. As because Assam is the only homeland for the Assamese and these linguistic groups they will have to go together keeping hand in hand, for their healthy development. Assamese language has already acquired long ago

whatever it could from the Tibeto-Burmese group of languages. To become expressive like the Assamese language, to be able to express philosophical ideas, to be able to use language imaginatively and to become as resourceful as the Assamese language—these small languages will naturally take some time. If the tribal-Assamese languages get separated from the Assamese language, how will their development be possible? This is a matter worth pondering. This issue should not be made a matter of prestige for one language or another. Rather we should find a way out by giving due importance to the question of the development of the tribal-Assamese languages.

Certain elements are trying to create divisions among the Assamese speaking people on the basis of tribals non-tribals. They advocate identity of nationality on the basis of genetic similarity or on the basis of a primitive way of life. We have to admit that the ancestor of the most civilised man in the world also lived in forest and caves. Man has built up his civilization and culture by conquering and dominating nature with his thoughts, imagination and skill. Man has been moving forward from the orbit of a folk way of life to a city life. As we have built up our material life anew with the help of science and technology, similarly we have come out of the orbit of primitive faith and customs to judge the world on the basis of a new philosophy and make our life stand on the basis of a new consciousness. As it is not possible for us now to return to the caves, similarly we cannot go back in history to accept primitive beliefs and customs. Even if we consider this issue from the point of view of religion, we cannot now abandon the teachings of the neo-Vaishnavite movement based on Upanishadic philosophy and go back to nature worship—such as worship of stones, serpents, trees and such other objects of nature. On the other hand, those whose beliefs are founded on a materialistic philosophy of life also now cannot return to some of the stages of idealistic philosophy which preceded materialistic philosophy. In such a context we cannot set the clock back—we have to sail with the wind. It is in our interest that we keep pace with the changing situation.

Since nineteenth century the identity of a nationality has been founded on one geographical boundary, a common economic base,

one common language for communication and the same type of mental makeup which gets manifestations through the cultural activities of the people. The social life of Assam has also had its self-establishment on the basis of these common factors.

Even while maintaining the separate linguistic identity, we should be able to create a congenial atmosphere so that the people speaking other than Assamese may feel encouraged to accept Assamese as their second mother tongue. The desired change and enrichment of our social life depends very much on such a condition. Even the linguistic groups; such as Bengalis, Hindusthani or other people speaking other regional languages of India, who have settled in Assam will also have to come forward sincerely to create such a congenial atmosphere in the State for greater interest of our common social life. Only then we will be able to overcome the problems and the crisis that our social life is facing now.

If we can identify objectively the roads and crossroads of our past history that we have left behind, only then we will be able to get the right lessons from the past to build ourselves fit for the coming future.

(Translated from the original essay in Assamese by Dr. Ashoke Bhagavati)

THE CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Praphulladatta Goswami, former Professor and Head of the Folk Lore department of Gauhati University, has made signal contributions to the field of systematic research into Assam's cultural traditions. Several brilliant books authored by him provide valuable insight into Assamese folk mind and shed light on comparatively darker recesses of Assam's social and cultural history.

Dr. Tarun Chandra Sarma, professor in the Anthropology department of Gauhati University, is an acknowledged pioneer in the field of scientific research into Assam's antiquities. A number of fruitful archaeological explorations conducted by him, besides unravelling the mysteries of the State's prehistory, have stirred a general interest among the country's historians to seriously study Assam.

Dr. Durgeswar Doley, professor of Sociology in the Dibrugarh University, takes special interest in the study of tribal society. With his scholarly writings on tribal customs and culture, Dr. Doley has added considerably to our store of knowledge about tribal life of Assam.

Dr. Mohammed Taher, professor of Geography in the Gauhati University evinces greater and meaningful interest in the study of his subject with emphasis on social and cultural developments and has contributed much to the study of Assam's anthropological geography.

Dr. Birendra Nath Dutta, professor in the Gauhati University department of Folk Lore, has done indepth research into Assam's folk culture. Himself one of the most popular musical maestros of Assam. Dr. Dutta has provided through his papers and writings off beat glimpses of the Assamese folk mind.

Sri Pradeep Dasgupta, Principal Correspondent of the prominent Bengali Daily, the Ananda Bazar Patrika, takes profound pleasure in seriously studying the historical process of racial and cultural confluence that has thrown up the composite Assamese society and culture.

Dr. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya, one of the most prolific writers of Assam, composes poems, writes novels and short stories and taught journalism in the Gauhati University. A Sahitya Akademy laureate, his creative writings as well his regular columns in the prominent dailies of Assam hold a faithful mirror to the Assamese society and the Assamese mind. The coveted Jnanpith Award is also awarded to Dr. Bhattacharyya recently for his novel "MRITYUNJOY". He is now the president of the Sahitya Akademi.

Sri Parameswar Sarma, a former Vice Principal of B. Borooah College and former member of the State Planning Board, is named among the most prominent economists of the State. His deep concern for development of Assam's economy and modernisation of the traditional Assamese society is amply reflected in his erudite and analytical writings.

Srimati Pushpalata Das, a verteran freedom fighter and an able parliamentarian, has through her writings shed brilliant light on the comparatively less known recesses of Assam's history before and after Independence. A devoted disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, her present writings constitute a passionate search for the relevance of Gandhism to the present times and the present ills of the State and the country.

Dr. Pramode Chandra Bhattacharyya, retired Principal of B. Borooah College, Gauhati, is an eminent educationist and a

prolific writer. He has been a pioneer in the field of systemetic research into Assam's tribal cultural traditions and has authored countless revealing papers and articles on the process of Assam's cultural assimilation.

Sri Jadu Kakoty, a prominent journalist and columnist of the State, is presently associated with the Agradoot group of newspapers. A serious commentator particularly of economic and political developments, his writings on Assam's socio-economic affairs are as highly informative as they are thought provoking.

Dr. Pratap Chandra Choudhury, former Director of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian studies of the Government of Assam and former Professor and Head of the Department of History of the University of Dibrugarh, Assam has been making contributions untiringly to the field of systematic Research to Assam's History of civilisation and culture. He has authored a good many research articles and a few valuable books like the "History and civilisation of the People of Assam".

Dr. Nagen Saikia, an eminent writer of both fiction and non-fiction, teaches Assamese Literature in the Dibrugarh University. He held the honorary office of the General Secretary of the Asam Sahitya Sabha for long 7 years. He presided over the Literary-symposium section of the Asam Sahitya Sabha's 53rd Session held at Pathsala in 1987. Presently, he is a Member of Parliament.

BOOKS ON ASSAM

Following is a random list of books which are expected to satisfy some extent the urge of our valued readers to know more about Assam and her people.

Sl.No.	Name of Books	Author
1.	Assam District Gazetteers	: B.C.Allen 1905-07
2.	A History of Assam Company:	H.A. Antrobus 1957
3.	Early Geography of Assam	: B.K. Barua 1952
4.	A Cultural History of Assam Vol. I	: B.K. Barua 1954
5.	The Red River & The Blue Hills	: H. Barua 1962
6.	Early History of Kamarupa	: K.L. Barua 1933
7.	A Glimpse of Assam	: U.N. Barua 1946
8.	Social History of Kamarupa (3 Vols.)	: N.N. Basu 1933
9.	Lachit Barphukan and his Times	: S.K. Bhuyan 1947
10.	A Chronicle of Assam 1681-1826	: S.K. Bhuyan 1933
11.	Studies in the Literature of Assam	: S.K. Bhuyan 1962
12.	Sketches in Assam	: S.O. Bishop 1885
13.	Bahristan-i-Ghayabi (Moghul wars in Assam)	: Dr. M.I. Bora 1936
14.	Sketch of Assam	: John Butler 1847

Sl.No.	Name of Books	Author
15.	Travels & Adventures in the Province of Assam	: John Butler 1858
16.	The Place of Assam in the History & Civilization of India	: S.K.Chatterjee 1955
17.	Old Relics in Kamarupa	: J.C. Dutta 1891
18.	Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam	: K.N. Dutt 1858
19.	Aspects of the Heritage of Assam	: Ed. K.N. Dutt 1959
20.	A History of Assam	: E. Gait 1926
21.	A Brief Sketch of the Religious Beliefs of Assam People	: M.N. Ghose 1896
22.	Assam under the Ahoms	: U.N. Gohain 1942
23.	The Geography and Population of Assam	: HH Godwin-Austen 1928
24.	An Account of Assam	: F.B. Hamilton 1940
25.	The Mother Goddess Kamakhya	: B. Kakati 1948
26.	Discovery of Assam	: Ed.S.C.Kakati 1954
27.	Old Times in Assam	: T. Kinney 1896
28.	Topography of Assam	: J.M. Cosh 1837
29.	The Background of Assamese Culture	: R.M. Nath 1948
30.	Introduction of Assam	: D. Neog 1947
31.	Plea for Assam and Assamese	: A.R.DhekialPhukan 1855
32.	A short Account of Assam	: B. Rajkhowa 1915
33.	A Descriptive Account of Assam	: W. Robinson 1841
34.	Stories from Assam History	: B.M. Sen & R.C. Goffin 1928

Sl.No.	Name of Books	Author
35.	The Rebellion of 1857 vis-a-vis Assam	: B. Sarma 1958
36.	Ancient Treasures of Assam	: P. Choudhury & M.C. Das 1959
37.	Studies in the History of Assam	: S.K. Bhuyan 1965
38.	The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea	: Ed.W.F.Schoff 1912
39.	Monograph on the Silk Cloths of Assam	: B.C. Allen 1889
40.	Assamese Language & History of Assamese Literature	: D.N. Bezbarua
41.	The Gold & Silver wares of Assam	: F.C. Henniker 1905
42.	Assamese—Its Formation & Development	: B. Kakati 1941
43.	Aspects of Early Assamese Literature	: Ed. B. Kakati 1953
44.	Ancient Assamese Script	: S. Katakai 1936
45.	The Economic Mineral Resources of Assam	: C Fox 1947
46.	Development of Script in Ancient Kamrupa	: T.P. Verma 1975(1979)
47.	The Forest Resources of Assam	: M.C. Jacob 1940
48.	Petroleum in India	: P. Evans 1954
49.	The Economic Development of Assam	: P.C. Goswami 1963
50.	Across the Golden Heights of Assam and NEFA	: J.D. Baveja 1970
51.	India's Northeast Frontier in the Nineteenth Century	: Ed. V. Elwin 1959

Sl.No.	Name of Books	Author
52.	The Challenge of the North East	: S. Bhat 1975
53.	Tribes of Assam	: S. Barkataki 1969
54.	Folk Literature of Assam	: P. Goswami 1965
55.	Geography of Assam	H.P. Das 1970
56.	The History and Civilisation of the People of Assam	: P.C. Choudhury 1959
57.	Political History of Assam Vol. I	: Ed. H.K. Barpujari 1976
58.	Political History of Assam Vol. III	: Ed. A. Bhuyan 1978
59.	The Land of Seven Sisters	: J.P. Saikia 1975
60.	Assamese Literature	: H. Barua 1965
61.	Assam	: S. Barkataki 1926
62.	Glorious Assam	: R.M. Nath
63.	The Background of Assamese Architecture	: R.M. Nath
64.	History of Freedom Movement of Assam	: Ed. A. Bhuyan
65.	Social History of Kamarupa	: N. Basu
66.	Geology of Assam	: D.N. Wadia
67.	1857 in Assam	: M. Bora
68.	Sankardeva the Vaishnav Saint of Assam	: B.K. Barua
69.	Temples & Legends of Assam	: B.K. Barua
70.	Assamese Proverbs	: P. Barua
71.	Sankardeva and His Time	: M. Neog
72.	Assamese Drama and the Stage	: H. Bhattacharyya 1964
73.	Bihu Songs of Assam	: P. Goswami 1957

Sl.No.	Name of Books	Author
74.	Sankardeva	: M. Neog 1967
75.	Assamese Literature	: B. K. Barua 1941
76.	Modern Assamese Literature	: B.K. Barua 1957
77.	Folk Tales of Assam	: J. Barooah 1911
78.	Assamese Popular Superstitions	: B. Rajkhowa 1920
79.	Assam Valley	: R.C.M. Thomson 1948
80.	Tribal Folk Tales of Assam	: S. Barkataki 1968
81.	Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs	: P. Gogoi 1978
82.	Hastividyarnava (treatise on elephants)	: Ed. P.C. Choudhury 1976
83.	Sattriya Dances and their Rhythms	: M. Neog and K. Changkakati
84.	Music of Eastern India	: S. Ray
85.	Folk Tales of Assam	: M. Pakrasi
86.	Local Finance in Assam	: U.N. Bordoloi
87.	The Economy of Assam	: D.K. Banerjee
88.	Folk Lore of Assam	: J. Das
89.	Cinema in Assam	: P.P. Bora
90.	Social Relations in an Ahom Village	: I. Barua
91.	Among the Dimasas of Assam	: D.G. Danda
92.	Gods and Goddesses of Assam	: A. Bhattacharjee
93.	Teachings of Sri Sankardeva	: R. Malakar
94.	Planter Raj to Swaraj	: A. Guha
95.	Religion of Love and Devotion	: L.N. Bezbaroa 1968
96.	The Studies in the History of Assam	: K.L. Barua 1973

Sl.No.	Name of Books	Author
97.	Studies in the Vaishnava Literature & Culture of Assam:	K. Medhi 1978
98.	This is Assam :	Ed. B. Shastri 1958
99.	Outlook on NEFA :	Ed. P. Chaliha 1958
100.	Annals of Asam Sahitya Sabha:	M. Neog 1976
101.	Origina and Growth of the Assamese Language and Literature :	D. Chaliha 1949
102.	History of Medieval Assam :	N.N.Acharyya 1988
103.	Background of Modern Assamese Literature :	N. Saikia 1988
104.	The Historical Literature of Assam :	L. Gogoi 1986
105.	Literature and Society in Assam :	Tilottama Misra 1988
106.	North East as viewed by Foreigners :	N.N.Acharyya 1986
107.	The New Light on the History of Asamiya Literature :	D. Neog 1962
108.	The Eastern Frontier of British India :	A.C.Banerjee 1946
109.	Assam in the Days of the Company :	H.K.Borpuzari 1963
110.	Evolution of Assamese Script :	M. Bora 1980
111.	Social History of Medieval Assam :	S.N. Sarma 1989
112.	An Account of Assam :	J.P. Wade Ed. B. Sarma 1972



Assam, the land where even the gods once aspired to die, is a colourful land, almost in the border land of imagination and reality. A land of colourful nature and equally colourful people. A meeting ground of races and cultures. A unique cultural mosaic evolved in course of a long eventful history of assimilation and fraternization of diverse bewitched groups, and a process that highlights the rare values and virtues, the adorable traits and tendencies of a tolerant, peaceful, friendly people, A people that want to love and be loved.

Asam Sahitya Sabha (estd. 1917), the premier literary organisation of Assam, with its 850 branches all over the state has been engaging itself for the upliftment of Assamese language and literature and for cultural cohesion amongst the people of the state. ASSAM AND THE ASSAMESE MIND is a new addition in the list of about 250 titles, that the Sabha has published till date.



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